

Holst lecture, EMF 2018

Last year, I traced the development of Holst's musical output from 1905 (and we heard *The Mystic Trumpeter* at the festival) up to the outbreak of the First World War. This afternoon, I will trace the life and times of Holst, together with his compositions, from 1914 to 1919.

In August 1914, the First World War broke out. This coincided with Holst finishing the first sketch of *Mars*, the first movement of his *Planets Suite*. Little did Holst appreciate that that particular movement would be regarded by many as representing the real horror of war, in particular the carnage on the Western Front and the appalling casualties suffered by all sides in the next four-and-a-quarter years.

The outbreak of war had a direct effect on music in Britain. All German music was immediately banned. An all-Wagner evening was cancelled and substituted with a Franco-Russian programme as riots were feared. Thomas Beecham drew up a programme for the Proms which would see a complete absence of Teutonic music. Large numbers of German musicians disappeared overnight, presumably returning to Germany. All German music composed after the formation of the German empire in 1870 was banned. This meant that the works of Brahms were either regarded as admirable or reprehensible. Choral societies ceased to perform *The Messiah* and *Elijah*. However, the French got over the *Messiah* problem by treating Handel as an Englishman.

Vaughan Williams (by then over 40) enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Like so many of his compatriots, Holst volunteered for military service but was rejected due to short-sightedness, the neuritis in his right hand and bad digestion. I can't think that Army rations would have agreed with him.

By the beginning of the war, Holst had a cottage in Thaxted in Essex, which he visited regularly, composing at weekends and during holidays.

However, some people in Thaxted became suspicious of this Gustav Theodore von Holst. There were rumours that he was a German agent and he was reported to the police. Two ladies complained that this "German hymn-writer" was taking long walks in the countryside, armed with sketchbooks and maps and asking people about their surroundings. Fortunately, the police quickly decided that Holst was no threat to national security. He became accepted by the locals.

The vicar of Thaxted since 1910 was one Conrad Noel, a socialist, a brilliant orator and an advocate of folk dancing and music in church ceremonies. He and Holst became friends. Holst became guest organist and conducted the choir. Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1914, he began work on *Venus and Jupiter*.

However, the war had a negative effect on the performance of classical music and Holst's music was no exception. War service meant that so many professional

musicians were no longer available and it became impossible to organise concerts. Holst continued to teach at St Paul's Girls' School and also at Morley College.

By early 1915, the war had continued for six months and it was clear that this war would be a long and bitter struggle. There was an atmosphere of gloom and despondency. Of course, the previous autumn, everyone had assumed that victory over the Germans was a matter of course and that the war would be over by Christmas.

That year, Holst set the **Nunc Dimittis** for unaccompanied eight-part mixed chorus which was performed at Westminster Cathedral on Easter Sunday. There was no Magnificat. **Let's hear it in full.** Note the influence of Byrd and Palestrina.

1

As 1915 progressed, Holst completed *Saturn*, *Uranus* and *Neptune*. Next time you hear *Uranus*, why not then listen to *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Paul Dukas. I think that you will find some similarities. We will hear part of *Uranus* in a moment. You will know that at the end of *Neptune*, Holst uses a wordless female chorus. At the time, this was unusual in symphonic music. Those who have sung the chorus will know that the notes and the tuning can be quite a challenge. In 1920, this was described as "an almost superhuman difficulty to the female chorus".

Holst then turned his attention to his *Japanese Suite* comprising four brief dances founded on tunes whistled to Holst by a Japanese dancer Michio Ito. However, the suite has little in common with traditional Japanese music. The work has not turned out to be a success and indeed, there have been fairly disparaging comments. It's not bad, but clearly not great Holst. This was Holst's first work to be performed at the Proms. Incidentally, apart from *The Planets* this was the only orchestral music composed by Holst in the First World War. He also ignored music for brass band, opera and piano.

What were other composers creating during World War One? Someone will correct me.

<u>Vaughan Williams</u>	Virtually nothing as on war service.
<u>Delius</u>	<i>Double Concerto for Violin and 'Cello</i> 1915. <i>Eventyr</i> 1917.
<u>Elgar</u>	<i>The Starlight Express</i> 1915. <i>Sanguine Fan</i> <i>Spirit of England</i> Some patriotic works When believed war would be won, began work on four pieces, including 'cello concerto.
<u>Parry</u>	<i>Songs of Farewell, Jerusalem</i> 1916.
<u>Bax</u>	<i>Piano Quintet in G Minor</i> 1915, <i>November Woods</i> 1917.

Stanford

Irish Rhapsody No 5 1917
The opera, *The Travelling Companion* 1916
The anthem, *For Lo I Raise Up* 1914
Magnificat for eight voices 1918
Organ Sonatas 1 and 2 1917

Bridge

Lament, which we heard yesterday, composed as a tribute to a nine-year-old girl who, with her parents, went down with the Lusitania.

So on the whole, not a great output.

Hardly surprising. Only introduction of convoy system in 1917 that avoided defeat, by starvation due to unrestricted submarine warfare perpetrated by German U-boats.

During the first few months of 1916, Holst completed *The Planets* by composing *Mercury* which became the third movement. After nearly two years, the suite was complete, but a performance was a long way off. **Let's hear the opening of Uranus** as I played part of Mercury last year.

2

Holst then went on to compose what he considered to be his best part-song, namely ***This have I done for my true love***. Many assumed that the melody was Holst's arrangement of an existing folk tune. However, he insisted that the tune was his own. **Here's the opening.**

3

During the summer of 1916, Holst composed the *Six Choral Folk Songs* which he dismissed as "a limited form of art". They were performed in Newcastle, as was much of his music due to the enthusiasm of his friend Whitaker. Also that summer, he established at Thaxted a Whitsun Weekend and invited students from Morley College and girls from St Paul's to make music and relax in the Essex countryside. Conrad Noel was very enthusiastic. For the students, this was an ideal means of escape from wartime London. For the schoolgirls, they had an opportunity to get away for a weekend. Some parents were a little apprehensive, having heard that services at Thaxted were somewhat "High Church". The participants performed music composed by Holst together with early music and the weekend was a resounding success. One of the works performed was the *Three Festival Choruses* where Holst had arranged three old melodies for chorus and orchestra. **Let's hear the beginning of *Turn back o man, forswear thy foolish ways***. On hearing the piece, Vaughan Williams declared that it should be sung at the beginning of every marriage service. **Play.** That recording was made in July 1930 at the Temple Church in London. The organist was George Thalben-Ball. What impeccable diction.

4

In August 1916, a letter was published in the Times complaining that no works by leading English composers were to be included in the Proms season. Now this sounds familiar. Indeed, there was nothing by Parry, Bantock, Vaughan Williams or Holst. The correspondent suggested that works by these composers should be performed "even if some German works have to be sacrificed".

The war was going badly. The British were suffering appalling casualties in Flanders and the supply of volunteers was drying up. Lloyd George (Prime Minister) introduced conscription for all unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 41. This had a serious effect on amateur music-making. Choral singing became almost impossible. In October, Holst complained that Morley Choir had 50 women and two men and that “50% of the men, can’t even sing”.

Holst did though keep in touch with Morley students who had been sent to the Front and in particular with Cecil Coles and Sidney Bressey both of whom were subsequently killed on active service. We should not forget the impact (unimaginable in today’s world) the loss of over 700,000 soldiers had on all walks of British life. No families were left untouched. Every day of the war about 570 people died. Putting that statistic into perspective, 72 died at Grenfell Tower. Imagine eight times that number, every day for four-and-a-half years.

The **Four Songs for Voice and Violin** were inspired after a chance encounter one evening at Thaxted Church, when Holst heard a student from Morley College (Christine Ratcliffe) singing and accompanying herself on the violin. There are two arrangements, one for tenor and the other for soprano. **Let’s hear the last of these songs for soprano.**

5

By the end of 1916, the orchestration of *The Planets* was virtually complete. It was to be a very large orchestra. The task of preparing the full score was quite beyond Holst working on his own. He was assisted by Vally Lasker and Norah Day and by his pupil Jane Joseph. He had originally composed the work for two pianos (which incidentally has been recorded). When his neuritis prevented Holst from doing the scoring himself, his assistants would work from the annotated manuscript.

In early 1917, Holst began work on *The Hymn of Jesus*, undoubtedly his greatest choral work and some would say his finest composition other than *The Planets*. In May, Holst turned his energies to the second Whitsun Festival, again to be held at Thaxted. There was much music-making. As Holst described it, “We kept it up at Thaxted for about 14 hours a day”. The Festival ended on Whit Monday and that evening the students from Morley College returned to London by train. However, there were no seats and they had to journey in a railway horse-box where they sang 16th century motets throughout the journey. Imagine that happening today.

That summer, Holst moved to another house in Thaxted where he returned at the end of the summer term to continue composing the *The Hymn of Jesus*. Holst used two plainsong melodies, namely *Vexilla Regis* and *Pange Lingua*. The opening plainsong melody is given to the trombones, as perhaps you might expect, seeing that Holst had, in his youth, been an excellent trombonist.

As Michael Short says in his biography, one of the most characteristic features of the work is the use of harmony as an expression of intense religious experience. Massive conglomerations of sound produced by the double chorus and orchestra contrast dramatically with simple Amens sung by the semi-chorus.

Most members of choral societies were used to the fairly unchallenging harmonies of 19th century oratorio. They were no doubt stunned by the level of harmonic dissonance which features in ***The Hymn of Jesus***.

The other striking feature of the work is its association of religion with dancing. In fact, dancing has long played an important part in religious ritual. **Here is part of the third movement.**

The Hymn of Jesus is undoubtedly one of the most important Christian choral works of the 20th century. Holst himself thought that the piece was the best thing he had written.

The full score was prepared and again Holst was assisted this time by Dulcie Nutting, a young student. However, wartime circumstances prevented any possibility of a performance.

Morley College was situated quite close to Waterloo Station, which was a prime target for the Zeppelin bombers. Frequently, classes had to be transferred to the basement, during air raids. Holst complained, "I am fed up with the raids – in the daytime the children are worn out and nervy and at night the cellar concerts are a great success, but they last hours without any interval and leave one limp for tomorrow's work."

1918 began without the prospect of the cessation of hostilities. Life in London remained difficult, due to constant bombing raids.

Holst did not meet Adrian Boult until 1916, when Holst arranged for Boult to hear *The Planets* played on two pianos by Miss Lasker and Miss Day at St Paul's Girls' School. Incidentally, these young ladies toured Britain playing *The Planets*. It's interesting therefore that many concertgoers heard *The Planets* for the first time not as an orchestral piece, but as a two-piano arrangement.

In February and March 1918, Boult gave a series of concerts at the Queen's Hall with the LSO and this established his reputation as one of Britain's outstanding young conductors. Holst and Boult began a close musical association which was to continue until Holst's death in 1934. Indeed, Boult became a major advocate of Holst's music.

The third Whitsun Festival duly took place, including music by Holst himself. However, there was also music by Purcell, Morley and Palestrina. A female voice choir (which clearly had a good head for heights) climbed to the church roof and sang Vittoria's *Come, Holy Ghost*. However, all was not well and in fact this proved to be the last Whitsun Festival held at Thaxted until revived many years later. Following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Noel began to preach the principles of communism from the pulpit. Although Holst himself was not offended, others were and decided to stay away. Holst though continued to help with the music, often playing the organ at church services.

Despite the shortage of male voices, Holst continued to teach at Morley College until the end of the summer term. He was then given a year's leave of absence to undertake educational work for the YMCA. Unfortunately, still using the 'von', it was felt that this might indicate that he was a German and this would not go down well with allied internees. He was therefore rejected for an appointment in Holland.

It was suggested that this would be a good opportunity to drop the 'von', which he duly did, but not until September 1918, just two months before the war's end. He was sent to Welbeck camp in Nottinghamshire for training where he was advised that he would next be working amongst troops at Salonica in Greece. Richard Terry from Westminster Cathedral took over at Morley College and the composer Norman O'Neill the orchestra at St Paul's Girls' School.

Whilst Holst awaited his departure, he was approached by Henry Balfour Gardiner, the composer and philanthropist. He had previously helped Holst financially on a number of occasions and offered a very special farewell gift, namely a private professional performance of *The Planets* on 29th September, shortly before Holst's departure. Holst rushed over to see Boult and advised him that they had the full use of the Queen's Hall Orchestra and that Holst wanted Boult to conduct. Boult immediately familiarised himself with the score. There were frantic preparations amongst Holst's friends, colleagues and pupils who were engaged in the mammoth task of preparing a full set of orchestral parts. The Choir of St Paul's Girls' School agreed to perform the choral part at the end of *Neptune*. The plan was that the Queen's Hall would be used in the morning for a rehearsal with a performance in the afternoon to an invited audience. There will be a centenary performance of *The Planets* at the Barbican in London on 29th September 2018, introduced by Professor Brian Cox. I'm told he won't be conducting.

The audience that afternoon was overwhelmed and Holst received an ovation. Sir Henry Wood was so impressed that he engaged Boult on the spot.

Let's digress for a moment.

How successful was Holst in getting his music performed during the war? Well probably about as successful as other leading English composers. All suffered from a general lack of performers, a direct result of the war. Holst's choral work *The Cloud Messenger*, his opera *Savitri*, his mini 'cello concerto *Invocation* and two of the four groups of *Hymns from the Rig Veda* were performed, but not much else.

Holst took a short course in piano-tuning and repairing as he felt that this might come in handy when entertaining the troops.

On 1st November 1918, Holst arrived in France, just 11 days before the armistice. He travelled on to Greece. On arrival, Holst found that the British troops were demoralised, following an earlier failed offensive, together with malaria, fever and an influenza epidemic which had put 10,000 soldiers in hospital.

In the absence of precise instructions, Holst decided to make contact with one Captain Vowles who was trying to organise musical activities. Holst agreed to give a talk. A few days later, he bumped into Vowles who was covered in bandages and plaster. "This is your fault," said Vowles. "I was so excited by your talk gazing up at the stars and humming the themes of the pieces you had played on the piano, I did not see a large shell crater in the road."

Holst's teaching career had largely been spent at a middle-class girls' school. You might imagine that tough, cynical soldiers would have been impossible to cope with. However, this did not deter Holst who in fact achieved instant and unqualified success. Holst was able to play and conduct all sorts of classical music. The soldiers responded wholeheartedly to his efforts. He was given a room where he would make himself available each afternoon to teach music to anyone who cared to come along. On one occasion, 16 men turned up for tuition. Fourteen wanted to learn the piano and two wanted to sing. Holst persuaded them to reverse these numbers. He thus had a choir of 14 which later went on to win first prize in a music competition. He even managed to enlist some new recruits for Morley College, just as soon as the troops had returned to London.

One should not assume that immediately the war ended, all troops quickly returned home. The organisation of repatriating hundreds of thousands of troops from all over the world, was an immense task, not assisted by the lack of shipping, much of which had been sunk by U-boats. In all, the British lost 2479 merchant ships in the war. The process of repatriation took an age. The troops became bored. Holst's musical talents were a great morale-booster. He certainly achieved much during his time in Salonica. Amongst many concerts, he organised one of British music including *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* and works by Purcell, Stanford, Elgar, Edward German and Percy Grainger. The choir was made up of soldiers and nurses and the orchestra was the Artillery Training School Band. There was an audience of 500.

Meanwhile, back in London, in February 1919, the first public performance of *The Planets* was given in the Queen's Hall under Adrian Boult. Sadly, the composer was absent. He was then told that he was to be transferred to headquarters in Constantinople and made preparations for his departure. The night before, his kit-bag was stolen containing all his personal possessions, letters and diaries. Amongst the missing items was his musical notebook in which he had noted down sketches of works in progress. It was never found.

He was asked by the YMCA to continue for another year, but decided to return to London. In May 1919, Holst received a telegram informing him that *The Hymn of Jesus* had been selected by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust as one of five works to receive an award out of 64 compositions submitted by British composers. The work was described as "a notable addition to the choral music of this country". He arrived back in London at the end of June 1919 after eight months' service. He returned to St Paul's Girls' School, where he was greeted with open arms. He went on a walking tour in the Cotswolds returning to Thaxted about the middle of August.

As you may recall from last year's talk, Holst was a keen walker, often covering vast distances on his own. There in Thaxted he began composing a work motivated by the waste of life and the futility of war, which he named **Ode to Death**. An awkward title today if you are planning to include it in a concert programme. I'd prefer 'In memoriam to the fallen'. This work was composed in memory of musicians and friends who had been killed in the trenches. The words were taken from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* choosing the elegy "When lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". **Let's conclude by playing part of that work** which I am pleased to say will receive a performance in Liverpool next month and at Gloucester Cathedral early next year.

Thank you.

Society/leaflets.