

HOLST

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NEWS

DECEMBER 2017

This is the third edition of our monthly newsletter. This will be sent by email to all our members, or by post to those not on the internet. Ideas, news and articles to me please (Chris Cope) – chairman@holstsociety.org – for our next issue by 15th March 2018. We hope to let you have the next issue at the beginning of April.

GIFT AID

We are now registered with the Revenue, but await a formal response. Once that is received, I can write to all subscribing members with a view to claiming 25% Gift Aid on the annual subscription. I hope to be doing this in early January.

BRITISH MUSIC SOCIETY

In their newsletter of November 2017, they kindly published two letters from me addressed to the chairman of BMS, in which I set out the sorry state of British music featured at the BBC Proms. There is always a performance of The Planets. What the Society is hoping to achieve is rather more music than that. In 2017, The Perfect Fool was included in one concert.

PAYPAL

We are in the process of setting up a PayPal facility which will enable overseas applicants to pay their annual subscription.

HOLST OPERAS

On 15th November, Bristol University's Operatic Society staged Holst's short operas, Savitri and The Wandering Scholar. Member Chris Carter attended and there follows his write-up.

HOLST OPERA DOUBLE BILL DRAWS FULL HOUSE IN BRISTOL

A rarely performed double bill of Holst one-act operas proved to be a revelation to the performers as well as the audience in Bristol recently. On 15 November, the university's Operatic Society staged "Savitri" and "The Wandering Scholar" to a house so packed that 50 people had to be turned away, and health and safety measures were seriously challenged. And, if the riotous standing ovation at the close was anything to go by, there is now a healthy new band of Holst devotees in the city.

The mysterious tableau-like Savitri was the first of Holst's major operas to be performed in his lifetime, and the boisterous, bawdy Scholar was the last. So, as well as demonstrating a perfect contrast of moods, the coupling provided an interesting insight in to how the composer's confidence and technique matured in the 15 odd years that separated them.

Conductor Zak Eastop was bowled over by his discoveries when he was leafing through manuscripts in the library. "It's ironic – but a huge testament to Holst's spirit," he says, "how the earlier 'Savitri' is a contemplation of the victory of love over death, while the boundless joyousness of the 'Scholar' was written by a man facing death in the face."

'Savitri's' minimalist staging traded physicality for an imaginative use of light. A highly effective gauze backdrop was used to separate the real world from the alternative world of Maya beyond the forest. This gave a ghostly impact to the sinister approach of Death and the ethereal nature of the wordless female chorus. Savitri's (Reima-Rose Michaels') sense of command was electric. In resisting Death's demand for her husband's life, she was no mere archetype - but a flesh and blood woman choosing Satyavan (the impressive Quito Clothier) as an equal partner in love, rather than as one merely submitting to duty.

Though the story itself is impelling, the libretto (Holst's own from a scene in the Mahabharata) is not the opera's strongest point. Tom Tanner's production therefore wisely ensured it was the hypnotically sensuous music which was the focus - the singers essentially providing the vehicle. With the possible exception of Death's withdrawal scene, the orchestral balance was maintained perfectly throughout.

By contrast, the 'Scholar' was more about the acting, with the music designed to support the antics. The plot – a racy farce based on a passage in Helen Waddell's book



of a similar name – involves the rival affections for Alison, the farmer's wife, when her husband is away in town. The pace was jaunty yet tightly controlled throughout, with lyrical passages and comically orchestrated punctuations as the action demanded. This supported magnificent performances from Nick Jones as the Scholar – whose strong presence nevertheless perhaps over-dominated at times – and Paula Raussman as Alison, who moved seamlessly between irritation, winsomeness and panic as the discoveries unfolded.



(Why, one asks, do all the saucy women in mediaeval times seem to be called Alison?)

The 'Scholar' is stylistically very advanced, and, like *Savitri* to a lesser extent, foreshadows the sound world of Benjamin Britten. In tonality, tautness, economy of instrumentation, indeed the very concept of a chamber opera – and not simply as it was Britten, a confessed

devotee, who edited the work for performance 17 years after Holst's death.

The orchestra required is a small one – two string quartets, double woodwind and French Horns – and was performed to a very high standard. As there is less room to hide, handling such an intimate set of forces takes great skill. The small textures and contrasts were brought out with consummate clarity – yet able to rally when needed to produce a sound which appeared twice that size.

"It is Holst's concision which is so remarkable," says Zak. "He never uses a theme or motif for more than is necessary. Once it's served its purpose, it's dispensed

with. A short opera makes this easier to do of course. There should be no need for padding."

This rejection of anything stale and the search for ways to expand musical meaning are two of Holst's greatest trademarks. This was more than evident in Bristol on 15 November, the only regret being that this outstanding production was for that one evening only.

Chris Carter

CHORAL WORKS

We have now received from the British Library the full orchestral score in manuscript in respect of the early choral works *Ornulf's Drapa* and *Clear and Cool*.

Ornulf's Drapa (Opus 6/ H34) is a work for baritone solo and orchestra and dates from 1898. It has never been published, performed or recorded.

Clear and Cool (Opus 5/ H30) is sub-titled *The Song of the River* and is for chorus SSATB and orchestra. It was composed in 1897. The first performance was on 26th March 1897 at the Athenaeum in Shepherd's Bush given by the Hammersmith Socialist Choir with piano accompaniment, conducted by the composer. The piano accompaniment seems to have disappeared long since. The work has not been given a further performance and therefore the full orchestral arrangement has never been heard. The work has not been published or recorded.

On receipt of the two manuscripts, I checked these through and found that, with regard to *Clear and Cool*, the pages were numbered 1 to 10 and then 2 to 29. This seemed very odd. Having checked with Imogen Holst's *Thematic Catalogue*, she made no mention of the curious page numbers, but did say that it was a work of 38 pages, which squared with the number of pages received from the British Library. However, just to be on the safe side, to ensure that there was no missing page between 10 and 2, the Society has asked John Wright FRCO to look at pages 10 and 2. In his professional judgment, the sequence of music between the two pages is entirely logical and he does not believe that there is any missing page.

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At the Holst birthday concert in September, I discussed the two works with Stephen Layton, the conductor of the Holst Singers, who expressed some interest in both works. A copy of these manuscript scores is now being sent to Stephen who will give the Society a professional opinion as to whether they are worthy of performance/recording. On the assumption that they will be, we hope to be recording both works with the Holst Singers in 2019/2020.

THE CLOUD MESSENGER

Received a performance on 4th November at St Andrew's Hall in Norwich, given by the Norwich Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus conducted by David Dunnett. Also included in the programme (somewhat strangely) was Sibelius' 1st Symphony. The concert was sponsored by the Holst Society (our first) and the programme carried an ad from the Society. There was an attendance of nearly 500. The performers added another 200 and therefore we had nearly 700 people who probably were hearing The Cloud Messenger in concert for the first time. Let's hope that this is the first of many performances of this much-neglected work.

A STUDY DAY

Member Chris Carter has summarised the events of the day.

READING DEVOTES A DAY TO STUDYING HOLST

On 28 October, Holst was the subject of an all-day study seminar held by the Reading branch of the Workers Educational Association. Former Reading University Director of Music Gwyn Parry Jones made a point of bypassing the Planets Suite in order to concentrate on the lesser known masterpieces – ranging across song, wind band, orchestral suite and opera, and culminating in the glorious Hymn of Jesus.

The event was an eye-opener for those who have always tended to see Holst as the junior partner to Vaughan Williams. Yet, although joined at the hip as friends and critics, their preoccupations were very different. While Vaughan Williams struggled to find his voice, Holst was innately musical from childhood. His first-hand experience as a professional trombone player also gave

him a profound understanding of the orchestra. Yet the instrumentation was never indulgent – rarely other than clear, limpid and sparing, and in the later works even spikily austere.

The group were led through works which exemplified and brought out some of Holst's key characteristics. His use of ostinato repeated figures, for example - as in Beni Mora, the Chaconne from the Suite in E Flat, Indra and the Japanese Suite - which some critics have seen as foreshadowing minimalism. Then there was his fondness for processions to mark the progress of time - as in Saturn, Egdon Heath and the Hymn of Jesus. And techniques such as the deliberate choice of low double basses which open Egdon Heath in order to force the listener to concentrate hard.

Folk music was a huge but not over-powering influence. Holst was adept at absorbing its characteristics into his style rather than simply replicating traditional tunes. It was his subsequent fascination with mysticism and Sanskrit thought, which produced keynote works such as the Hymns to the Rig Veda and the opera Savitri, an extract of which was played in the performance given by Janet Baker and Robert Tear. Holst had an instinctive feel for writing for the human voice, particularly the female voice – and Gwyn had particular praise for his Seven Part-Songs of 1925 to poems by Robert Bridges.

Unlike Vaughan Williams, Holst had no private income to allow him to compose freely. But he was rare among composers in his love of teaching, the time constraints of which probably account for the brevity of most of his works. An entire thesis could be written on Holst's innovative and far-sighted teaching techniques – deployed with skill and patience among amateurs at St Paul's Girls School and Morley College, as well as with would-be composers. "Don't jump from key to key", he once said, "expand the key instead. And never compose when you're excited."

The study day enjoyed an added local piquancy because of Holst's connection with Reading when he was university lecturer in composition. At one point, there was a lively debate on trying to locate the garden where he was photographed in 1922, looking studiously nervous and surrounded by his students.

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So, learning of Holst the man, as well as composer, was very present throughout the day. A figure of boundless energy in the face of a life-time's sickness, a complete indifference to either fame or approbation, amusing in private but remote and shy in public. Above all though, a man with a clear, almost transcendent vision. "Music," he once said, "being identical with heaven, isn't a thing of momentary thrills, or even hourly ones. It's a condition of eternity." In one of his greatest works – The Hymn of Jesus – he strove to achieve just that. By combining plainchant, a contemporary lament for human suffering and dispersed choral placing, he succeeded in marrying time and timelessness.

Chris Carter

SAVITRI AT CAMBRIDGE

The opera was performed at Cambridge on four days from 8th to 11th November inclusive. Each performance commenced at 11pm, which must have deterred even the most devoted followers of Holst's opera. The Society has yet to receive any feedback. However, if any Society member attended one of these performances, we would like to know.

PLANETS FOR BRASS

On 1st November 2017 at Keele University, the highly acclaimed brass band Foden's Band played the entire Planets Suite for brass. I do not know of a recording of the entire work for brass. Perhaps this should be a future project for the Society.

UNPUBLISHED SONGS

The Society is very grateful to the Holst Foundation for agreeing to authorise the British Library to release a copy of nine songs in manuscript. Unfortunately, one, My Joy (H36) dating from 1898, appears to be incomplete. Only the first page appears to be within the BL's archives. I will, though, check the archive at my next visit.

The remaining eight have been considered by Britain's leading tenor, James Gilchrist, who, in November, wrote expressing his views, which were as follows:-

1. Soft and Gentle (H14) – Not hugely inventive.

2. Awake my Heart (H14) – Quite rousing, but simple.
3. Invocation to the Dawn (H68) – This is good.
4. Fain would I change (H68) – Similar feeling. Good.
5. In a Wood (H68) – I really like this. Very lush.
6. I will not let thee go (H68) – I got a bit bored.
7. Vigil of Pentecost (H123) – Very Planets. I like it and it's original.
8. Ballad of Hunting Knowe (H147) – Got a bit bored by this.

Apart from 1, 6 and 8, we appear to have five songs, all of interest, of which none have been published and certainly never recorded. As to whether they have ever been performed, is anyone's guess.

The Society hopes that James may be in a position to perform these five songs (together with others that I hope to unearth from the British Library during the next couple of months) at the Holst birthday concert in September 2018. Member John Wright FRCO, has agreed to accompany.

PHOTOGRAPHS

The two photographs that I have included with this newsletter show Holst and Vaughan Williams walking somewhere in the Malvern Hills on or about Saturday 10th September 1921. This follows a performance of the Hymn of Jesus at the Three Choirs Festival which took place the previous Thursday. The exact locations cannot be identified.

THE GODWINE CHOIR

On 21st and 22nd October, at St Jude's Hampstead, the Godwine Choir recorded a CD of part-songs by Holst and George Dyson. I was able to attend the Saturday morning

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session, when the choir recorded the Five Part-Songs (H61).

Although this will not be the first recording, it will certainly be the only one available. The previous recording dates back some 30 years, but is no longer available.

In addition to the five part-songs, the choir is also recording Love is Enough from Five Part-Songs (H48).

The Society is sponsoring this recording. We look forward to the CD appearing, hopefully later this year. We will of course let members know as soon as it appears.

ELGAR SOCIETY

I have been invited by the secretary of the Elgar Society News to write a piece of up to 1000 words on Holst for the April edition, which I will do.

GREETINGS

Finally, may I take this opportunity of wishing you a happy Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous 2018.

