

This was a lecture given by Chris Cope (chairman) at the English Music Festival held in late May 2017, when the Holst Society was launched.

Gustav Holst – The Mystic Trumpeter – The Road to Absolute Greatness

Gustavus Theodore von Holst was born on 21st September 1874, somewhere in Germany, or, at least, that's what members of the British public would assume, and not unreasonably. In fact, Holst was an Englishman born in Cheltenham.

In 1871, Adolf Holst (whose grandfather had moved to England from Russia at the end of the 18th century) married. Their first child, Gustavus (we'll call him Gustav), was born in 1874.

Gustav took up the violin and the trombone. Nevertheless, the piano was Gustav's principal instrument. His father was determined that the boy would become a concert pianist.

He applied for a scholarship to Trinity College of Music, London, but was unsuccessful. The college doesn't like to be reminded about this. Rather sensibly, his father sent him to study counterpoint at Oxford, where he gave recitals.

He applied for a scholarship at the Royal College of Music, but was refused. Undeterred, Adolf borrowed £100 from a relative and entered his son's name for the Ordinary Entrance Examination. He passed and entered the RCM in May 1893.

Unfortunately, Gustav's eyesight was poor and the neuritis in his right arm worsened and as a result he had to abandon his hopes of becoming a concert pianist. Instead, he concentrated on the trombone and the organ.

Despite studies at Oxford, Gustav's knowledge of harmony and counterpoint was poor and as a result Stanford refused to accept him as a composition pupil. Having improved his knowledge of counterpoint, Gustav gained admission to Stanford's composition class. Stanford described him as "enthusiastic and happily not devoid of humour." Later, Gustav admitted that he had learnt more about counterpoint from William Byrd and Thomas Weelkes than from Stanford and others.

Returning to Cheltenham, Gustav would often save money by walking part of the way. Sometimes, he would walk the entire 97 miles from London to Cheltenham, with his trombone slung on his back. He became an inveterate walker and must have covered vast distances over the next 40 years.

His time at the RCM very nearly came to an abrupt end when the money which his father had borrowed, ran out and there was no prospect of negotiating another loan. Gustav redoubled his efforts to obtain a scholarship, having already made several unsuccessful attempts. Finally, in February 1895, at his eighth attempt, he was awarded a scholarship. The RCM is still embarrassed. This gave him free tuition, together with a maintenance grant of £30 per annum.

The autumn term of 1895 proved to be significant, in that Gustav met another student at the RCM, one Ralph Vaughan Williams. They struck up a friendship which continued until Holst's death nearly 40 years later. They would regularly hold "field days" when they would play through to each other their latest compositions.

He took part in debates and became interested in politics, joining the Hammersmith Socialist Society. He established the Hammersmith Socialist Choir. A young lady named Isobel joined the choir. They fell in love, became engaged and subsequently married. The composer Thomas Dunhill was somewhat put out about this as he too had been captivated by her charms. Isobel made Gustav shave off his beard and insisted that he should improve his dress sense. I think we chaps have all had similar experiences.

In 1897, VW invited Gustav to take over from him the post of organist and choirmaster at St Barnabas' Church, South Lambeth, at a salary of £50 per annum. VW did not need the money and from all accounts was fed up with his position, describing the choir as louts, the vicar as quite mad and the church itself as "this damned place". Not sure why he thought that Gustav would want to take the position. In the event, Gustav saw the light and quickly passed on the post to fellow student, John Ireland. Poor chap.

In 1898, Gustav decided not to continue as a student at the RCM and successfully applied for the post as trombonist with the Carl Rosa Opera Company.

George Bernard Shaw had a poor opinion of the Carl Rosa Opera Company describing the players as middle-class amateurs who played shamelessly to the gallery, altered their parts, assumed false Italian names and sang in broken English. Gustav also had the role of *répétiteur* which meant that he had to hammer out the notes on the piano for the cast to learn.

Gustav then discovered Sanskrit literature, which captured his interest. He visited the Department of Oriental Languages at the British Museum, but was dismayed to discover that the books were mostly in original Sanskrit. He therefore enrolled to take a course in Sanskrit. He discovered in Sanskrit literature a rich untapped source of inspiration which was to provide the basis for much of his music.

Gustav then toyed with the idea of having his music printed at his own expense but was dissuaded from doing so by VW who said that in doing so, this would brand the composer as second-rate, regardless of the quality of the music.

In 1904, he started work on a work for soprano and orchestra entitled *The Mystic Trumpeter*, a setting of Walt Whitman's poem "From Noon to Starry Night". The Ulster composer Hamilton Harty also set these words but for chorus and orchestra. Some years later, a critic considered Harty's version to be superior to Gustav's. However, I have yet to hear a recording of Harty's version. It is interesting the way that the two composers handle the final words "Joy! Joy! All over joy!" Harty sets for full chorus – triple forte. Gustav opted for restraint and spiritual transcendence with the orchestra playing quadruple piano, as you will hear this evening.

Imogen Holst (Gustav's daughter) believed that *The Mystic Trumpeter* demonstrates that Gustav was, at last, breaking away from his ten-year obsession with Wagner. There are many hints as to what was to come, such as the *Perfect Fool*, the *Hymn of Jesus* and *The Planets*. What can, though, be said with some assurance is that *The Mystic Trumpeter* is the first of Gustav's works in which his individual style can be identified. The title to this talk is taken from a view expressed by a critic following the first performance when he said:-

“One feels that the mind which imagined it, is bound, one day, to achieve something approaching absolute greatness.”

What a sage!

It was then that a group of clergymen decided that *Hymns Ancient & Modern* had become unsatisfactory. Vaughan Williams was commissioned to produce a completely new hymnbook to be called the *English Hymnal*. Gustav helped with the editing and submitted a number of hymns himself, including the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*, with which I am sure you are all familiar. This not only became one of Gustav's best-known compositions, but I am told is Britain's favourite carol.

In June 1905, *The Mystic Trumpeter* received its first performance in London with Gustav conducting. The work had a mixed reception. One critic observed “Mr Holst showed that he took modern composers, rather than old masters, as his models, the result being, as might be expected, not altogether satisfactory”.

In 1903, St Paul's Girls' School was founded. The first music mistress was Adine O'Neill, wife of the composer Norman O'Neil. She herself was a fine concert pianist. However, by 1905, the school had grown and accommodated 157 girls. It was clear that another music teacher was needed to teach singing enabling Mrs O'Neill to concentrate on the piano. Adine recommended Gustav who was interviewed and got the job. He held the position for the rest of his life. He became a popular teacher, one pupil saying that “there is no doubt about the fact that he made all music interesting and alive and that we were caught up in this spirit.” Gustav himself said that it was one of the great moments of his career when he came in early one morning on a dark winter's day to find several of the girls sitting around the classroom fire singing Palestrina for the sheer love of the music.

In about 1906, English folk music began to have an important influence on Gustav's compositions. Nevertheless, he was not a collector of folk song unlike VW, Sharp and Grainger. The influence of folk music resulted in two compositions, *Songs of the West* (still not recorded) and a *Somerset Rhapsody*. The work was played on *Breakfast on Radio 3* on Wednesday of this week.

In May 1906, the second performance of *The Mystic Trumpeter* was given by the Philharmonic Society. Critics were quick to detect disturbing signs of modernism. One said that “there were some painful dissonances, whether intended by the composer or due to inaccuracies in the orchestra, it is hard to say.” Certain members of the audience expressed their disapproval at the end of the performance by booing! Please. Not tonight. Another critic

said that if the work was not a success, it was at least a splendid failure. Nevertheless, Holst himself was delighted by the performance.

Morley College for Working Men and Women was opened in September 1889 in the Waterloo Road in South London. In 1907, the teacher of the music classes died. The committee approached VW who recommended Gustav. Isobel was pregnant and Gustav faced new financial responsibilities. He therefore decided to apply for the post. Gustav was duly appointed and the baby arrived. She was baptised Imogen, but apparently cried continually during her first months of life, reducing Gustav's nervous state to a low ebb. Imogen went on to spend her life championing the music of her father.

Under Gustav's influence, the college began to acquire its reputation as a centre for adult music making. One student described the college as "a sort of heaven we go to on Mondays and Wednesdays."

Gustav once quoted a foreigner who said that the English like music, but can do without it. Well we like English music, but we certainly cannot do without the English Music Festival.

The strain of teaching both during the daytime and in the evening was beginning to take its toll. Gustav was urged by VW to take a holiday. He offered £50, a considerable sum, towards expenses. The neuritis in his right hand was worsening. He was granted leave of absence from various teaching establishments.

And so in April 1908, Gustav left for Algeria and very much on his own. He wandered through the streets of Algerian towns and explored the countryside by bicycle. He was particularly attracted by the Arab quarter of Algiers. He jotted down musical fragments, melodies and rhythms he heard on his travels.

In 1909, Gustav composed his Suite Number 1 for Military Band. This piece was a remarkable departure from the usual transcriptions and operatic selections which bands were expected to play at the time. Those who took part in early performances spoke of their excitement at such an interesting and challenging work. The Suite has now become a classic of the band repertoire.

In early 1910, Gustav looked again at a work that he had sketched the previous year and which he had called An Oriental Dance for Orchestra. He added two further movements and so was created probably one of Gustav's best orchestral works, Beni Mora. The music was very much based upon the notes that Gustav had taken whilst on holiday in Algeria. The third movement contains a hypnotic repetition of a simple theme, again which he had heard in Algeria. He used a similar idea to great effect in Mars, the first movement of The Planets. He devised the idea of strands of diverse music coming together and then separating, which Charles Ives did in his Three Places in New England, at almost the same time, albeit that neither composer had ever heard of the other.

Surprisingly, Beni Mora is rarely played in public. This is very much a work that needs to be resurrected.

In April 1910, a revised version of a Somerset Rhapsody was performed at the Queen's Hall. The Daily Telegraph said that the music showed that the work may lead to heights unapproachable by the composer's contemporaries.

There then followed the third group of Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda. These were to be accompanied by harp instead of orchestra. Of the four sets, I think that these are the most appealing.

And so we move to 1911, during which Gustav composed An Invocation for 'cello and orchestra. In his biography, Michael Short says that the embryonic ideas presented in Invocation were later to re-emerge in a more developed form in Venus from The Planets.

There then followed the first performance in modern times of Purcell's The Fairy Queen, the score of which had been lost since Purcell's death in 1695. It was not to be found. At the end of the 19th century, J S Shedlock was asked to compile an edition of the work and by carefully piecing together fragments from various sources, he managed to produce a version which although incomplete was as near to the original as could be achieved. The work was engraved and ready to be printed. Shedlock then happened to be in the library of the Royal Academy of Music and taking down a volume at random was astonished to find that he was holding the long lost manuscript full score of The Fairy Queen. The Purcell Society was thus able to publish the original score in full. However, one does wonder just how much time and effort Shedlock had spent piecing together an alternative version, before finding the original. Still, he must have been delighted at what he had found.

But it was Gustav who was determined to put on a concert performance of the work. Students at Morley College were given the task of copying out parts and in the end, some 1500 pages of parts were copied. This was long before the days of photocopying. It was then found that the soprano parts were too high for untrained voices and whole sections had to be transposed down a tone. The alto parts also had to be adjusted. The performance before a large audience was well received. One critic later said that Morley College had become the Purcell centre of the world, entirely thanks to the commitment of Gustav.

For much of his married life, Gustav spent many hours walking on his own (sometimes with VW) or using his bicycle and travelling in Europe. These activities seemed to recharge his batteries and restore his health, which was never robust. It is interesting that Isobel, his wife, never accompanied him. Perhaps, in those days, wives simply stayed at home.

In 1911, Gustav composed two Eastern Pictures for women's voices and harp.

In 1912, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes visited Britain. Stravinsky's Firebird was given its British premiere. It seems certain that Gustav heard the work and may even have met its composer. The music certainly had a great effect on him and Stravinsky's influence is apparent in several subsequent works.

There was then another major musical event in London with the world premiere of Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra. Gustav certainly attended one of the two performances. It had a considerable effect upon the audience. One lady was reduced to tears

of grief, not joy. Gustav described it as like Wagner, but without the tunes. It certainly made a considerable impression upon him and was to spark the creation of *The Planets*.

In February 1913, the revised version of *The Mystic Trumpeter* was given by the New Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gustav himself. However, the *Musical Times* was not impressed remarking that, "This composer always displays fancy, but it cannot be said that in this long piece, he is at his best." Long? It lasts 20 minutes.

The revised *The Cloud Messenger* (a choral work) also did not go down at all well and Gustav was particularly disappointed believing that it was one of the best works that he had written. He wrote to a friend, "The whole thing has been a blow to me. I am fed up with music, especially my own."

Gustav was by now suffering from nervous exhaustion as a result of his arduous teaching schedules (quite apart from conducting and playing). He was invited to join the composers Balfour Gardiner and Arnold Bax together with Bax's brother Clifford (a poet) on an expenses-paid holiday to Majorca. When Gustav told Clifford Bax of his interest in astrology, Bax expounded on the subject at some length much to the disapproval of Balfour Gardiner who was contemptuous of such ideas. There was also much discussion about music with Gustav defending the works of Bach against the criticisms of Arnold Bax who claimed that Bach's music lacked emotion. They then took a steamer from Barcelona to Majorca and on arrival at Palma, they quickly became acquainted with the local liqueur, *Verdad*. Clifford remarked that Gustav looked particularly blessed whilst enjoying his evening glass of *Verdad*. They would talk about various matters from music to women. Gustav astonished the others by declaring that he had taught women for years and did not regard them as at all inferior to men. That was certainly a minority view in 1913.

On return from holiday, Gustav's interest in astrology developed rapidly and according to Clifford Bax, he became a remarkably skilled interpreter of horoscopes.

In the spring and summer of 1913, Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* returned to London for two seasons, introducing *Petrushka* and the *Rite of Spring*. Gustav heard both works and was impressed. Stravinsky's music opened up a whole new world of sound, particularly the rhythms of the *Rite* and the orchestral colours of *Petrushka*.

Just before Christmas 1913, he took himself off on a five-day walking tour in Essex and eventually arrived at the village of Thaxted. Thaxted was to have an important influence on his life and work. He was impressed by the peaceful atmosphere, the 15th century guildhall, the old buildings in the main street and above all, the magnificent mediæval church. He decided that he would like to live there. Fortunately, Isobel shared his enthusiasm and a few months later, they decided to let a cottage just outside the village. There, in these peaceful surroundings, Gustav began to work on *The Planets* although most of the composition took place in the soundproof room which had been built for him in the new wing at St Paul's School. There he was able to compose music in peace and quiet, isolated from the outside world.

However, during early 1914, Gustav was working on a Dirge for Two Veterans for male voice, brass and percussion. The words were by Walt Whitman and were used by VW in his cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*, composed some 20 years later. The trumpet calls in the Dirge were a foretaste of the violence that was to erupt in Mars. For those who know the VW, you'll be interested in how Whitman's text is treated by Gustav.

Although the work was completed before the outbreak of the First World War, the gigantic arms race was reaching its climax and it was only a matter of time before the world exploded into violence.

Although astrology was the starting point for *The Planets*, Gustav was neither influenced by astrology nor astronomy in the order of movements which are not the same as the orbits of the planets around the sun.

The first movement (Mars) was begun in May 1914, four months before his 40th birthday. The meter was 5/4. I suspect that no previous orchestral work had commenced with five beats to a bar. In addition, the meter was intensified by the use of triplets. The harmonic dissonances where there were clashes between moving chords and static pedal parts can be heard with similar effect at the end of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Has any composer ever succeeded in evoking the feeling of horror when a soldier realises the overwhelming nature of the forces advancing towards him and the probability of his own death. This was an uncanny premonition of the mechanised warfare that was to overwhelm civilisation over the next four years.

So whilst Gustav was composing the most ferocious piece of music in existence at that time, his day-to-day life as a teacher continued, together with concerts which he either attended or conducted. A complete contrast to the musical chaos he was creating.

The score for Mars was largely completed by August when war broke out.

The other movements followed in 1915 and the first part of 1916, the last to be finished being Mercury. The whole work was not performed until after the war was finished.

So our journey began in 1905 with the first performance of *The Mystic Trumpeter*, a work which reveals Gustav Holst's individuality as a composer emerging for the first time. Over the next ten years, he developed into one of our greatest composers, ultimately composing *The Planets* between 1914 and 1916 and which is undoubtedly the best-known piece of classical music in the Western World. I hope that the ten extracts you have heard demonstrate the road Gustav took towards absolute greatness. Undoubtedly *The Planets* is his supreme achievement.

Gustav continued to compose over the next 20 years. You may well be familiar with the ballet music from *The Perfect Fool*, *A Fugal Overture* (one of my favourites and played at my request on Breakfast on 3 yesterday morning, the anniversary of Gustav's death), *Egdon Heath* and *Hammersmith*. For brass band, we have *A Moorside Suite*. There are two operas dating from the 1920s. Choral music includes Gustav's other masterpiece, *The Hymn of Jesus* and *A First Choral Symphony*. There is a vast amount of music for chorus, both

accompanied and unaccompanied. There is music for voice and piano, piano solos and chamber music.

Gustav died in May 1934 at the age of 59 from heart failure, following a major gastric operation.

I would like to acknowledge the fact that Michael Short's biography has provided most of the material for this talk. Copies are available to purchase from the Abbey over the weekend.

And finally, some brief words about the Holst Society. Until last August, I was the secretary of the Stanford Society. Stanford, as you may recall, was Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music, where Gustav was a pupil in the 1890s. I decided to establish an English composer society and realised to my considerable surprise that there was no Holst society, although his birthplace in Cheltenham is open to the public and there is, in addition, a Holst Foundation. The Society is being registered as a charity. It will have two objectives. The first will be to promote and sponsor the live performance of Gustav's music, principally by amateur choral societies, orchestras and other music groups. This will be funded through subscription income, grants and legacies.

Secondly, the Society will promote the recording of music which, hitherto, has yet to be recorded and which is worthy of being recorded. Our first recording will appear autumn of 2018 and will feature all Gustav's Christmas music. It will be performed by the City of London Choir (my old choral society) under the baton of Hilary Davan Wetton. It will appear under the EM label.

It may astonish you to hear that there are no less than 168 separate recordings of Gustav Holst's music presently available in the UK. Nevertheless, there is still much music (particularly for chorus) which has yet to be recorded. Oh, and by the way, were you aware that there are no less than 414 CDs of music by Elgar? Haven't you got them all? Nevertheless, you will find that there is much duplication.

I hope that you may be interested becoming a member of the latest English composer society. The annual subscription is £25 and there is a leaflet for you to take away. I hope that you enjoy the works by Holst that you will be hearing this weekend. I also hope that you will enjoy the rest of the excellent programme that Em has put together. And finally, thank you for listening.