

## Gustav Holst: An English Composer

The following article was written by the composer Havergal Brian (1876-1972) and published in *Musical Opinion* (January 1940).

Gustav Holst was born at Cheltenham on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1874; his father was of Swedish extraction, and his mother was English. As a boy, Holst was taught by his father, who himself was a professional musician. In and around Cheltenham the boy worked extremely hard to acquire experience, as an organist, conductor of a choral society and of an amateur opera society. For the latter he composed a comic opera. He was still occupied with these useful juvenilities when his father sent him to study at the Royal College of Music, where Stanford and Rockstro were his principal teachers. Much has been written about the influence of Stanford, but little about that of Rockstro (*William Rockstro [1823-1895], the composer and musicologist, lectured and taught at the RCM in the last four years of his life. Holst was a student there from 1893*). Yet it was the latter who directed Holst to the use of mediæval modes, and these were a decisive factor in his artistic development. Holst's first idea was not that of becoming a composer: he longed to be an expert pianist, but an affliction of the right hand persisting, he had to abandon the idea. Sad to say, he was never free from that nerve trouble, and consequently always wrote with difficulty; but he found some compensation when he turned to the trombone, which he learned to play skilfully and with profit to himself. He practised in varied combinations – orchestras, dance bands, and seaside bands, travelling with the Carl Rosa troupe and sojourning with the Scottish Orchestra.

Whilst Holst was earning his living as a professional trombonist, he was acquiring an invaluable experience later to be used as orchestrator when composing. His earliest compositions lacked distinctive quality as music, but their inspiration came from original and unconventional sources. His settings included poetry by Walt Whitman, and the Indian myths. Holst's sensibility and reaction to poetry developed simultaneously with his creative talent. His development as a musician is not dissimilar from a sculptor, who, working under Greek influences and ideals, eventually becomes renowned as a master of Assyrian sculpture.

Holst's experiences as a trombonist in opera taught him much. When he began writing operas, he threw aside all the trappings of the spectacular and the 'grand', using only the most economical ensembles. His instructions as to the performance of his operas are economical, even to the point of being casual. As a composer, also, he remained faithful to the same principles. He used bare essentials; and he drove through the middle of an argument with direct means of expression and boldness of strokes.

Holst's early opera, *Savitri* (an Indian subject), is an attempt at a perfect model with primitive resources. The score is more modest than a Monteverdi, and it may be performed in the open air or in a small room, and a curtain is optional. The orchestra consists of two string quartets, a string bass, two flutes, and English horn; there is a hidden chorus of female voices; and the only visible characters are three principals: Satyavan (a woodman), Savitri (his wife) and Death. Though the means used are slight, the work has some overpowering moments, particularly in a

7/4 march. Holst introduced many new ideas in his chamber operas, the most effective of all being the unaccompanied monologues. Savitri echoes Shakespeare and Maeterlinck in emphasising that we are but shadows and the substance of dreams. The plot is the simple one of the wife saving her husband from death.

In the writing of librettos for his operas and choral works, Holst disclosed marked literary ability. Indian myths set his imagination free and inspired him to sing. *The Cloud Messenger*, a splendidly compact work for chorus and orchestra is undeserving of neglect. It is refreshing in its variety of harmony, bold chordal structure and sensitively pointed rhythms. It has a Wagnerian tinge: striking melodic basses: a forecast of the processional march style, found in later works and in the symphonies of Gustav Mahler.

Early in his career, Holst experimented in five and seven pulse measures. These abound in his large works, and save them from monotony when he repeats a phrase *ad libitum*. Experiment proves that a bar of five or seven pulse measure can be repeated fifty times without becoming wearisome. Holst made a success of using odd time measures. His Oriental suite, *Beni Mora*, was his first popular success. Prior to its performance at a festival by the Musical League and Incorporated Society of Musicians in Birmingham, January, 1913, Holst was no better known than the other English composers whose works were being first performed in the same programme. *Beni Mora* lifted him out of obscurity. The background of it is Morocco and (as befits an Oriental impression) the means are entirely lyrical grafted on to unconventional rhythms. The first movement, *Adagio* (a slow dance), creates the impression of a long wail; the second (also a dance) made the audience sit up by the persistent uneven drum beats (an early example of Holst sounding 'all out of gear', but he wasn't); while the Finale created a bewildering impression. Called 'In the Street of the Ouled Nâils, it is reputed to be built on Arab themes heard by the composer during a visit to Morocco. The most curious feature of this movement is a bar phrase repeated incessantly by solo flute in its lower register. In the previous movement, the repetitive figure was played by tympani. The flute figure with a few chords makes a background on which other tunes appear, redolent of the East in colour and hue. They are combined over a Holstian rhythm producing a rich harmonious effect. Eventually, the initial flute figure emerges from its obscurity and creates a sinister impression by its gradual expansion until it submerges the orchestra. Even after the dénouement, the flute figure returns, finally making its exit by way of the tympani. The work bears the impress of tragedy.

Whilst the Beni Mora Suite lifted Holst from obscurity, a later work, *The Planets*, written during the last war, carried his name across the seas, with subsequent international fame. In the seven movements, Holst's genius flows on in full tide: it is the largest orchestral score for the number of instruments employed, and for once he does not indulge his habit for economy, which can hardly be commended. Bizarre, yet carefully calculated orchestration; big lusty tunes, as in the jovial Jupiter, solid massed formation in the military-like Mars, a slender lyric in the Venus, and in spite of the exhilarating blurring produced by Mercury, he deserved a better theme. Jupiter is the most attractive of the gods: the movements Jupiter and Mars created astonishment at the first performance. It needs to be put on record that, had it not been for the generosity of a contemporary composer, who paid for the cost of rehearsals and performance (Balfour Gardiner), *The Planets* would have been shelved, like many other large-scale works by English composers.

Music so frankly outspoken as that of Holst had been accepted as the prerogative of Elgar: but here was another Englishman doing the work quite as well, but differently. The idiom and character of English music is here in full: only an English composer could have depicted Jupiter by such healthy jovial irony. Differently satirical and riotous is Uranus: there are rare qualities and refined delicacy in the impressionism and mysticism in Saturn and Neptune. The Planets, a symphonic masterpiece whose virtuoso orchestration sustains its amazing qualities and never sags, is Holst's finest achievement.

Holst spent half his life teaching, the other half being given over to composition. He became a great force by impressing his personality on others and getting the best out of them. A work inspired by his teaching at St. Paul's (Girls) School is the St. Paul's Suite, for string orchestra, which will live as long as a string orchestra exists to play it. The first movement, Jig, and the finale, The Dargason, have resemblance in their rhythmical tunes. Big and brawny, and linked in a symphonic mould, they suggest laughter and good cheer. The second movement is a rippling Ostinato, built on four recurring notes; while the third movement, Intermezzo, is a finely balanced scheme of contrasts, after the manner of Brahms's Hungarian Dances.

In another style is the Fugal Concerto, for solo flute, oboe and strings, which in the first movement is a gesture to Handel. As a harmonist with original views, Holst was delightfully obstinate and uncompromising. An accidental sometimes appears in disputed territory, but there is no yielding. Remove the accidental and the impression of the music is just ordinary. As Holst writes it, the music gives the impression of strength – acid and bitter. The second theme of the Adagio is an instance: solo oboe is accompanied by strings: in the third bar a most pungent effect is obtained by the oboe holding E natural resolving to D against violins playing E sharp and G sharp. Similar instances abound in the later Holst. Like his use of odd time measures, he played with them until they took root and became a natural part of his technique. A sparkling, jig-like Allegro concludes this all-too-brief Fugal Concerto. It sparkles, certainly, but like the sparkles of clean snow on a frosty night.

One would like further to pass in review several works of equal importance to those already mentioned, but the will must be taken for the deed. However, mention must be made of Holst's two operas, *At the Boar's Head* and *The Perfect Fool*. The first is adapted from Shakespeare and is a medley of English traditional tunes, while *The Perfect Fool* increases in excitement until the very last bar.

In his *Egdon Heath*, Holst disclosed a new manner of means – where nothing but essentials have a place in the scheme. Another advance in that manner was marked by a group of eleven songs to words by Humbert Wolfe. (There are in fact twelve songs in this group – but at the first British performance [5th February 1930, Wigmore Hall, Dorothy Silk accompanied by Kathleen Markwell], which Brian attended, one ['The Thought'] was omitted.) This type of drawing results in music spinning which has a wide mesh – rather stark and bare, after the exuberance of an earlier Holst. These songs made a deep impression on me at their first performance and deserve to be heard again.