

The Passing of Gustav Holst

The following article was written by the composer Havergal Brian (1876-1972) under the title "On the other hand" in the magazine *Musical Opinion* in the July 1934 edition.

I am distressed at the news of the death of Gustav Holst. My personal acquaintance with him was brief, but I venture to think that we had many mutual sympathies. Years ago when I was living in the North of England, I had a letter from him, and with it came a number of part-songs, which were settings of words from the Hindu Rig-Veda, for which reason I found it difficult to secure the interest of choral conductors. At the festival of 1913, given at Birmingham Town Hall by the I.S.M. and the Musical League, both Holst and I had an orchestral work in the programme: and it was at the sectional rehearsal of the brass and woodwind of my *Doctor Merryheart* that we met. (*The concert occurred on 3rd January 1913; Holst's work was Beni Mora*). He was frankly interested in what I termed a comedy overture, but he remained shy and reserved. I saw him again a few years ago at the school at Brook Green where he was music-master. Holst was a great personality, because he attained fame by following an entirely individual and solitary path. His orchestral suites, *Beni Mora* and *The Planets*, his choral works, *Hymn of Jesus*, and his opera, *The Boar's Head*, are unlike any other European music. He was decidedly a great fertiliser in expressing continuously his abiding faith in English music and also for his passion for the music of Henry Purcell. Greater honours were doubtless in store for Gustav Holst: and had his span but equalled that of Elgar, who will say that equal fame would not have been his?

I have sorrowfully noted the differences in national lamentation. Was there, indeed, all that difference in the quality of the music of Elgar and Holst? I think not. But Holst was of a different cast of mind from Elgar, who walked well with the mighty. Holst, on the other hand, shrank from the least whisper of personal publicity, and feared lest he should override any of his fellows. I know this is so, for more than once has he asked me to forbear mentioning his name. I hope that his music will bear the handicap he himself placed on it by his reticence.

However, the death of Holst did bring some splendid tributes to the worth of the man and his music, that in *The Times* being in full accord with its great traditions. (*By Ernest Newman*). One felt pride in being of the race of the musician and his biographer. An excellent estimate of Holst is that written by Edwin Evans in the last edition of *Grove*. Holst undoubtedly suffered in popular appreciation from the wild and unreasoned feelings engendered by the war: his name had such an un-English form and sound. The grandson of a von Holst who had migrated from Sweden in the early part of the nineteenth century, Holst was well advised to drop the prefix Von. But to those who knew him, it seems quite unnecessary, for he was filled with the spirit of England: in outlook and training he was English, and I think of him intellectually as a compound born of two such diverse minds as those of Keats and Wordsworth.

As a composer, the first half of Holst's life was uneventful if not undistinguished: he had strong democratic tendencies and at one time I know looked fondly to the Orient, though not in the way of other Western composers cultivating the pseudo-Oriental manner. Holst was

drawn by the spiritual mysticism of Hindu mythology. His finest work of this period was the opera, *Savitri*, and his oriental studies really came to a climax in the extraordinary suite, *Beni Mora*, which was inspired by a visit to Morocco. From his study of Whitman came an overture named *Walt Whitman* (still unperformed, the setting of Whitman's verses, *The Mystic Trumpeter* (1904), and the *Ode to Death* (Leeds, 1922). These Whitman works were all written within a period of eighteen years and, with his musical directorship at the Passmore Edwards Settlement and Morley College, show his constructive human outlook on life. Many works arose from his English speculations, the climax being the *Choral Symphony* on poems by Keats.

Holst had great influence as a teacher, working at Reading College, the Royal College of Music, and St. Paul's Girls School, Brook Green, where doubtless the spirit of the man will go marching on. The Brook Green appointment was held for thirty years, and here the work was congenial and successful, his most brilliant pupils here being the late Jane Joseph and Imogen Holst, his own daughter. Other of his girl pupils were exceptionally clever, and some requited his kindness by doing much of his copying, for Holst was sore afflicted by a nerve disorder in the right hand, which made writing difficult and always painful. These girls knew so well the workings of his mind in scoring that Holst had only to write the important essentials, and all would be completed to his satisfaction.

The work of every composer is subject to fluctuation of appreciation: even British Funds move a little. Apart from his orchestral suites – *Beni Mora* and *The Planets* – none of his works suffered from frequency of performance. Holst's development was slow: which would follow his retiring disposition. He had nothing to offer to national enthusiasm, such as Elgar gave in abundance: but who was the greater musician, Elgar or Holst, will never be decided: though they both worked on the same resources, their mental outlook was as different as night from day. Holst never had a henchman, though there are those who could have spoken honestly of his good work. The opportunity is now with those who know his music, which includes every type of orchestral and choral composition. The best possible way of service is by encouraging performance, and to this end there should be a Holst Society in every shire of England and in every capital town of the colonies, with a parent society having its roots deep down in the hearts of all those who have studied at the Royal College of Music of which he was the most distinguished scion.