

GUSTAV HOLST

Entry for Grove's Dictionary, written in 1999

Holst's prominent position amongst twentieth century English composers owes a great deal to the immense popularity of his orchestral work, *The Planets*. The only pieces to achieve anything like the success of that one work are on a much smaller scale, yet equally idiosyncratic. His wholly individual blend of Hindu philosophy with English folksong set him on a path far from the mainstream of European tradition, although his early works reveal a thorough grounding in conventional forms.

Life

GUSTAV HOLST, English composer, born Gustavus Theodore von Holst in Cheltenham, England, on September 21 1874. (He used the name Gustav von Holst until the end of the First World War, when it seemed appropriate to drop the 'von' as he was to work with demobilised British soldiers). His great grandfather Matthias (1769 - 1854) was born in Riga, Latvia, of German ancestry, and was a composer, pianist, and teacher of the harp to the Imperial Russian court in St Petersburg. Not long after the birth of his first child, Gustavus Valentine in 1799, Matthias fled to England - apparently as a political exile - where he built up a reputation in London as a teacher and composer of fashionable but insignificant salon pieces. His second son Theodor was born in 1810 : a painter of exceptional ability and imagination (pupil of Fuseli) he exhibited at the Royal Academy at the age of sixteen, but died in comparative obscurity in 1844. Gustavus Valentine settled in Cheltenham in the 1830s and, like his father, taught harp and piano. Several of his five children pursued musical careers; his fourth child Adolph (1846-1901) was an excellent pianist and organist, much involved in local musical activities. In 1871 Adolph von Holst married Clara Lediard, a piano pupil and talented singer; they had two children - Gustav and his younger brother Emil (1876 - 1951), who became a minor Hollywood film actor under the name Ernest Cossart. Always prone to ill health, Clara died in 1882 after the still birth of her third child. Adolph married another of his pupils in 1885 : she also gave birth to two sons, but was more concerned with religion and theosophy than with her family.

Gustav Holst was a somewhat sickly child, and although his father taught him piano from an early age, neuritis in his right arm made it clear that he was unlikely to have a career as a pianist. He also learned the violin (for which he had little enthusiasm) and, as a cure for asthma, the trombone - this was to prove useful in his early professional life. His first efforts at composition were made in his early teens, and by 1891 he had achieved a number of local performances of vocal and instrumental pieces. After unsuccessfully applying to Trinity College, London, for a scholarship, he was sent by his father to study counterpoint for several months with George Frederick Sims, organist of Merton College, Oxford. On his return to Cheltenham, Holst secured an appointment as organist and choirmaster at a local church, and continued to write for local forces, including in 1892 an operetta, *Lansdown Castle*.

In 1893 he gained admission to the Royal College of Music, London, where, after further study of counterpoint, he was accepted into Charles Villiers Stanford's composition class. His other teachers included Hubert Parry. In 1895 he was awarded a scholarship in composition, relieving his father of the increasingly difficult burden of supporting him. Also in 1895 he met Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was to become his closest friend, and a profound influence : more so than that of his teachers, although the first performance in modern times of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, under Stanford, left a lasting impression. Until then Holst's major obsession had been with Wagner (he had heard Mahler conducting *Götterdämmerung* at Covent Garden in 1892), and he was to remain under Wagner's shadow until well into the 1900s.

Holst's other enthusiasms were for the idealistic philosophies of Walt Whitman and William Morris,

and in 1896 he was asked to become conductor of the Hammersmith Socialist Choir, which rehearsed in Morris's house. Among the early members of the choir was Isobel Harrison, whom he was to marry in 1901 (their daughter Imogen was born in 1907). At about this time he also became interested in Hindu literature and philosophy, and took lessons in Sanskrit at University College, London, and although mastering little more than the alphabet, he gained enough understanding to be able to make his own adaptations of Sanskrit texts.

Holst's second study at the Royal College was the trombone, and he undertook freelance engagements while still at the College (in 1897 he played in the Queen's Hall Orchestra under Richard Strauss). Although offered an extension of his scholarship in 1898 he decided instead to join the Carl Rosa Opera Company as trombonist and répétiteur. His compositions up to this point had been competent but uninspiring : he had published only a handful of songs, and a career as a composer was a distant prospect.

After two years of opera tours, in which he had nevertheless found time to compose, Holst joined the Scottish Orchestra in Glasgow (in 1903 he was to play again under Richard Strauss), combining this work with freelance engagements. Although grateful for the opportunity to have learned about the orchestra from the inside, he took the decision to give up an orchestral career at the end of 1903, and, after several months of unemployment, he was offered a teaching appointment at James Allen's Girls' School in Dulwich, in succession to Vaughan Williams. In 1905 Holst was appointed head of music at St Paul's Girls' School, Hammersmith, where he was to remain until the end of his life. Among other teaching posts he held was that of director of music at Morley College in South London from 1907 until 1924, where he acquired a great feeling for amateur music making. In 1911 his students there gave the first performance since 1697 of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*.

Teaching thus established a pattern for his working life, which remained more or less unchanged until 1925. The sound-proof music room at St Paul's School became his refuge for composition at weekends and during the school holidays; from 1916 he also worked at a cottage near Thaxted in the Essex countryside. Here he established a Whitsun festival in the local church for both amateur and professional musicians, which continued until his death. He maintained a puritanical style of life, both in London and in the country, where his greatest pleasure was in taking strenuous walking tours. He rarely took holidays, although a visit to Algeria in 1908 (where he explored the desert on a bicycle) inspired the orchestral suite *Beni Mora*.

Although his reputation had been steadily growing during the years before the First World War, it was not until *The Planets*, written between 1914 and 1916, received its first performance (given privately as a gift from his friend Henry Balfour Gardiner in 1918) that he achieved genuine recognition. Before that took place he had already written, in 1917, the choral and orchestral *Hymn of Jesus*, perhaps the most characteristic and original work of his maturity.

The sudden popular success of *The Planets* led to the publication and performance of many earlier works, most importantly of the opera *Savitri*, which had been composed in 1908, towards the end of his Sanskrit period (an earlier Sanskrit-based opera on a grand scale, *Sita*, remains unperformed to this day). But teaching still continued to occupy a great deal of his time - in the 1920s he held posts at the Royal College of Music and University College, Reading. Then, after a fall while conducting in 1923, followed by an arduous first visit to the United States, he was advised on medical grounds to take things easier. He spent much of 1924 in Thaxted, and in 1925 gave up all his teaching commitments apart from St Paul's School.

1927 saw the first major festival devoted to his music. This was in Cheltenham, where in 1928 the first British performance of the orchestral *Egdon Heath* took place, the day after its New York premiere. Though acknowledged today as one of his most significant works, it met with a lukewarm reception. This had indeed been the case with much of Holst's music since *The Planets* : he refused to

court popularity by writing what was expected of him. The huge success of this one work disconcerted a man who was essentially an introvert, although an inspiring figure to his many pupils and followers, and totally without pretension.

In 1932 he was visiting lecturer in composition at Harvard (among those he taught was Elliott Carter); but he was taken ill and had to return prematurely to England. During the last eighteen months of his life, in spite of having to live largely as an invalid, he composed some of his most individual works, including the Brook Green Suite and the Lyric Movement for viola and orchestra. He died of heart failure on May 25 1934, after an operation for a duodenal ulcer; his ashes were buried in Chichester Cathedral.

Works

From 1895 until 1933 Holst kept a notebook 'List of Compositions', beginning with his Opus 1 opera *The Revoke*, written while he was a student at the Royal College, and tried out by college students under Stanford. Like many works written both before and after it, the opera was never published, nor was it performed professionally. Holst developed slowly as a composer, and he reached the age of 30 before achieving in the Whitman setting for soprano and orchestra, *The Mystic Trumpeter*, a genuinely individual voice (although even that work remained unpublished until 1989). His earliest music showed the influence of Mendelssohn, and early attempts at operetta that of Sullivan. In the 1890s Greig, Dvořák and Tchaikovsky were absorbed, and Wagner began to permeate his orchestral style. An 'Elegy in Memoriam William Morris' from the Op. 8 Symphony *The Cotswolds*, composed in 1899, is by some way the most accomplished of his 'apprentice' works, its harmonic world surprisingly close to that of Scriabin's early piano music. In spite of their derivativeness, Holst's other early orchestral works - *A Winter Idyll*, the overture *Walt Whitman*, and the *Suite de Ballet* reveal an instinctive orchestral flair that, amongst his contemporaries, is only matched by Elgar. Of these works, only the *Suite de Ballet* of 1899 was published, after Holst revised it in 1912.

Holst's early published works consisted for the most part of insignificant 'salon' pieces - songs, part-songs and small-scale chamber works. He worked intermittently at two operas, *The Magic Mirror* and *The Youth's Choice*, of which only the latter was finished (but not performed). Both are heavily Wagnerian, but by 1904 he was beginning to throw off the pervasive influence of Wagner, and there are many fingerprints of his mature style in *The Mystic Trumpeter*, as well as a new sense of purpose. The bitonality of the fanfares near the beginning of the work point to the future, and the ecstatic but controlled vocal line reveals an increasing maturity. Holst seemed to be heading in the direction of a late-romanticism that has more in common with the Schönberg of *Verklärte Nacht* and *Gurrelieder* than with any British music of the time. It is fascinating to speculate on what might have resulted had Holst met Schönberg on an extended visit that he paid to Berlin in 1903.

The English folksong revival, in which his friend Vaughan Williams was one of the pioneers, became instead the catalyst which enabled Holst to fuse together the disparate formative elements that were to make the mature composer. The first music to show the influence of folksong was the orchestral *A Somerset Rhapsody* (1906, revised 1907), founded on traditional tunes and dedicated to Cecil Sharp. The *Two Songs without Words*, also of 1906, reveal an ability to invent folk-like tunes of his own. At the same time he began making folksong arrangements, although not all of these early efforts were published.

In parallel with this new development was a continuing interest in Sanskrit literature : from 1900 onwards he worked intermittently at the three-act opera *Sita*, to his own libretto, finally completing it in 1906. Not surprisingly, the music shows a development away from Wagner (Holst himself described it later as 'good old Wagnerian bawling') towards a more personal style, and much of Act III is of high quality, in particular a dramatic orchestral interlude between the first and second scenes. But the libretto is naïve and irredeemable, full of the archaicisms of contemporary Wagner translations.

The only other Sanskrit work of this period is the adventurous but somewhat clumsy symphonic poem *Indra* (1903). However between 1907 and 1911 he made many settings of Hymns from the Rig Veda, ranging from solo voice and piano to chorus and orchestra, and in 1912 he completed a major choral and orchestral work founded on Sanskrit poetry, *The Cloud Messenger*, less individual as a whole than some of the Rig Veda Hymns, but an impressive attempt at large-scale form.

The 'Oriental Suite' for orchestra, *Beni Mora*, the direct result of his holiday in Algeria in 1908, is perhaps the most individual work of this period, conjuring up the atmosphere of a North African town without resorting to cliché : the third of its three movements anticipates minimalism with its haunting four-bar ostinato figure repeated nearly fifty times. But by far the most significant achievement of these years was the opera *Savitri*, completed in 1908. Turning his back on the Wagnerian apparatus, Holst contrived what is probably the first 'chamber' opera, with minimal staging, only three characters, and an orchestra of no more than twelve players. Although the libretto (Holst's own, based on an episode from the Mahabharata) is still somewhat stilted, the simplicity of the story - Savitri persuades Death to restore to her her husband Satyavan - is matched by a new simplicity of musical language : the starkly bitonal opening of unaccompanied voices was a new departure for Holst, and the use of modality and speech-derived rhythms both come from his study of folk music, here applied perhaps unexpectedly to an oriental subject.

Two unjustly neglected works from the same years, *Hecuba's Lament* (1911) and the *Hymn to Dionysus* (1913) show Holst turning to classical themes, only taken up again in 1920 with his *Choruses from Euripides' Alcestis*. Other works show Holst working more successfully on the small scale than the large. The *First Suite* of 1909, now long established in the military band repertoire, and the *St Paul's Suite* for string orchestra, completed in 1913, and probably his most popular work after *The Planets*, have both become classics; while the four movement orchestral suite *Phantastes* was a disaster, and was withdrawn after its first performance in 1912. The ability to write succinctly and inventively without outstaying the natural development of his material, and to sustain this invention over nearly fifty minutes, is what makes his next major work, *The Planets*, such a remarkable achievement.

There are few precedents for a seven-movement orchestral work on this scale. The character studies of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* or Elgar's *Enigma Variations* are individually on a much smaller scale; perhaps closer in concept as abstract pictures in sound are Debussy's *La Mer* or Nocturnes. Holst was also influenced in form, though only marginally in content, by Schönberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*, which he heard in 1914 - the original title of *The Planets* was 'Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra'. He encountered Stravinsky's music as well for the first time in 1914, and though the influence may not seem direct, he himself admitted its importance to him. The work is often referred to as a 'symphonic suite', but this is not appropriate : the music's originality does not lie in a symphonic treatment of its subject matter, but in the diversity of form and spontaneity of invention which Holst employs in each movement.

Holst conceived *The Planets* at least as early as 1913, and the first movement, *Mars, the bringer of war* was completed in 1914, anticipating rather than influenced by the outbreak of the First World War. *Venus* and *Jupiter* followed; *Saturn*, *Uranus* and *Neptune* were composed during 1915; *Mercury*, the third movement (planned at one stage to be the first), was not finished until 1916; the full score was finished early in 1917. The first complete public performance was not given until 1920, but the work's reputation had already been established by the private first performance in 1918 and several subsequent partial performances. Holst recorded the work twice, in 1922-3 and in 1926, both times with the London Symphony Orchestra. He was, along with Elgar, one of the first composers to commit his music to record, and although he was not so gifted a conductor as his senior colleague, both of the recordings are valuable documents.

A great deal of Holst's musical personality is encapsulated in *The Planets* : a rare glimpse of the

extravert in Jupiter, a more characteristic heavy-handed humour in Uranus, a sad processional in Saturn. Holst is at his most relaxed and lyrical in Venus, a vein that he did not often recapture in later life. Though in mood the other three movements could not be more different one from another, they share a common harmonic background, with a particular emphasis on bitonality: in Mars this serves to produce harsh dissonance, in Mercury a quicksilver elusiveness, and in Neptune, remoteness and mystery. In this last movement Holst uses an offstage choir of women's voices, singing wordlessly to magical effect - something he had already employed in *Savitri* (and may have borrowed from the third of Debussy's 1899 *Nocturnes*, which he almost certainly heard Debussy conduct in London in 1909).

Almost as if he had showed too much of a public face in *The Planets*, Holst immediately turned to more introspective subjects, although the choral and orchestral *Hymn of Jesus*, composed in 1917, was a considerable popular success in spite of its wholly undoctrinaire approach to religion. The key to the work is to be found in the phrase 'Divine Grace is dancing' (the words are taken from the Apocryphal Acts of St John), which Holst sets as part of a central, almost ritualistic, dance: the ecstatic quality of the music, mirroring a gnostic philosophy which was close to Holst's heart, is matched in English music perhaps only by Tippett's *The Vision of Saint Augustine* (1965). Characteristically Holst's next major work was another abrupt volte-face, turning from life-enhancing spirituality to serene resignation in his choral and orchestral *Ode to Death* of 1919, the last time he was to set the poetry of Walt Whitman, and one of his most individual achievements. But there is little room in the repertoire for choral works that last no more than 12 minutes, and the *Ode* is perhaps the least performed of Holst's major works.

Although Holst was not a natural composer of opera, he attempted the form a remarkable number of times - including early and unfinished works he composed no less than eleven operas and operettas, although without achieving a professional performance until 1921, with *Savitri* (his eighth). Towards the end of 1918, while he was in Salonica and Constantinople as music organiser for demobilised troops, he began to work on the libretto for *The Perfect Fool*. Completed in 1922, and first performed at Covent Garden in 1923, the opera was his first major failure since *The Planets* had brought him to prominence. Attempting parody and lightness of touch, Holst was unable to write a coherent scenario: the opera's plot verges on the incomprehensible (the 'perfect fool' is a non-singing caricature of Wagner's *Parsifal*) and the only music of real substance is the opening ballet, an orchestral showpiece which deservedly survives as an independent concert work. In spite of this failure, which he himself acknowledged, he began almost at once on another opera, this time turning to Shakespeare as his librettist. *At the Boar's Head* is a skilful amalgam of the tavern scenes from *Henry IV*, with music founded exclusively on 'old English melodies' - country dance tunes from Playford's *English Dancing Master* of 1651, as well as morris dance tunes, ballads and folk songs. First performed in 1925, it met with hardly more success than *The Perfect Fool*, but with far less justification: the pacing and vitality of the music is remarkable, although it is perhaps too undramatic in concept to make a genuinely viable opera.

Other works of this period show a new interest in counterpoint - the dynamic *A Fugal Overture* (1922) and the contrastingly lightweight and neo-classical *Fugal Concerto* (1923) for flute, oboe and strings, composed while on a visit to Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan. His enforced year of rest after this visit saw, as well as the composition of *At the Boar's Head*, the completion of the *First Choral Symphony* (a second was started in 1926, but did not progress much further than the selection of texts). The words are all taken from the poetry of Keats, including in the fine second movement, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The third movement is an impressive *Scherzo and Trio*, with the reprise of the *Scherzo* conceived for orchestra alone: but it just falls short of generating the excitement that the work needs at that point, and the *Finale* fails to provide an adequate resolution as Holst appears to lose his way in a rambling, over-episodic movement, whose finer moments do not succeed in sustaining its length.

The *Finale* of the *Choral Symphony* might indeed encapsulate the way in which Holst seemed to lose his musical sense of direction after this period of exclusive concentration on composition. The

strangely hybrid 'choral ballets', *The Golden Goose* and *The Morning of the Year*, composed between 1925 and 1927, are the only notable landmarks amongst many small scale and occasional pieces, and both of them work far better in the orchestral suites extracted by Holst's daughter Imogen than in their staged versions. He found the way forward again in 1927 with the composition of *Egdon Heath*, quickly followed by a succession of small-scale but major works - *A Moorside Suite* for brass band (1928), *Twelve Songs of Humbert Wolfe* (1929), the *Double Concerto* for two violins and orchestra (also 1929), the impressively individual *Choral Fantasia* (1930) - a work as unjustly neglected as the *Ode to Death*, whose striking form results from its original conception as an organ concerto - and *Hammersmith*, for military band, also rewritten for orchestra (1930). Contemporary with these works was his last and most successful opera, *The Wandering Scholar*, composed, like *Savitri*, for small forces, and for only four singers.

The music of *Egdon Heath*, inspired by Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, is elusive and unpredictable. Its three main elements are set out at the beginning - a pulseless wandering melody, first for double basses and then all the strings; a sad brass processional; and restless music for strings and oboe. All three intertwine and transmute and eventually come to rest with music of desolation, out of which emerges a ghostly dance - the strangest moment in a strange work. After this comes a resolution of sorts, and the ending, though hardly conclusive, gives the impression of an immense journey achieved, even though *Egdon Heath* lasts no more than twelve minutes.

Holst seems to have been stimulated rather than depressed by the work's lack of public success, and the music that followed shows no sign of courting popularity: *Hammersmith* - a *Prelude and Scherzo* for military band, though written for an ostensibly 'popular' medium is as uncompromising in its way as *Egdon Heath*, discovering, in the words of Imogen Holst, 'in the middle of an over-crowded London . . . the same tranquillity that he had found in the solitude of *Egdon Heath*'. With *The Wandering Scholar* he at last achieved the right medium for his oblique sense of humour, writing with economy and directness, and for the first time since his student years relying on a librettist (Clifford Bax, brother of the composer Arnold Bax - the libretto is based on an incident from Helen Waddell's book *The Wandering Scholars*). He was however too ill to attend the first performance in 1934, and the work remained in limbo until Benjamin Britten revived it for the English Opera group in 1951. Britten and Imogen Holst edited the opera for its first publication in 1968.

Although ill-health dogged Holst's last years he continued to write with new found facility, completing a powerful set of *Six Choruses* for male voices and strings to Helen Waddell's translations of mediaeval Latin lyrics in 1932, and the *Brook Green Suite*, a last present for the orchestra of St Pauls' School in 1933. He even found time to write a film score, *The Bells* (now lost) in 1931, and planned another in 1933. His last works were the remarkably beautiful *Lyric Movement* for viola and orchestra, and the *Scherzo* for a *Symphony*, whose other movements never advanced beyond fragmentary sketches.

Holst is an enigmatic composer, who found his own way without undue influence from others, and who has had surprisingly little influence on succeeding composers, although his great friend and colleague Vaughan Williams learned as much from him as he in turn gave to Holst. His musical language was not conventional: once he had freed himself from the influence of Wagner, it became progressively more angular and contrapuntal, and his use of modality is very different from that of other English composers (he has more in common with Hindemith). He was averse to theorising about music, once writing that 'a composer is usually quite unconscious of what is going on', and revealed very little about his technique of composition. He was not a great innovator, but the rhythmic impetus behind much of his music and his use of unconventional time signatures combined with cross- and permuted rhythms, probably derived from the English madrigalists, mark him out as a genuine individual. Other personal signatures are his use of ostinato, and with it, rising and falling scale patterns; melodically his music is marked by a predilection for fourths and fifths. Once he had outgrown the chromaticism of his early works he remained firmly wedded to tonality, although much

of his harmonic originality is owed to a subtle use of bitonality, and sometimes polytonality : counterpoint in several different keys simultaneously came easily to him. He commented that his technique was 'something quite apart from the hits and squashes of conventional modern harmony'.

He was an outstanding teacher, but worked almost exclusively with children and amateurs, frequently devoting more time to them than to his own works. His personal synthesis of seemingly disparate elements led to music of distinctive originality, concise and sometimes austere, yet aspiring to a visionary quality like no other. But he was also prone to unexpected lapses of judgement, especially in his stage works; and his very few chamber works are mostly insignificant. There is a strange lack of consistency in Holst's music, which does not stem from any lack of technical proficiency - even his earliest works reveal a thorough facility - so much as from an almost stubborn desire to be unpredictable. Imogen Holst well describes the often disconcertingly laconic nature of his musical language : 'as soon as he had made his point, he stopped'.

Holst is inevitably identified with *The Planets* above the rest of his music : its deserved but disproportionately huge popularity has overshadowed not only his own status as a composer of genuine originality, but also the freshness and resource of the work itself. He was constitutionally incapable of repeating himself, and, although his character is not easy to assess, it is easy to imagine his puzzlement at the thought that he might be expected to do so. Holst's capacity for self-renewal and for avoiding the shallow and obvious mark him out as, if not the most gifted of his English contemporaries, probably the most individual.