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Holst

THE PLANETS

RICHARD GREENE

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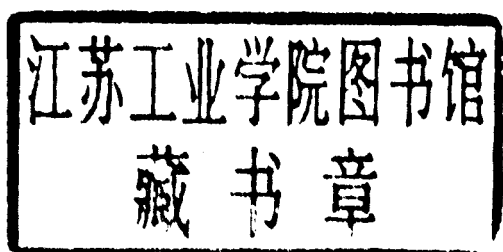
Holst: *The Planets*



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## Introduction

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Gustav Holst was born on 21 September 1874, under the sign of Virgo, ruled by the planet Mercury.

Mercury, as Holst would have read in his copy of Alan Leo's *What Is a Horoscope and How Is It Cast?*, is known as the "winged messenger of the gods," and a favorable planet for those who have left the senses for the mind. It is a mutable planet, absorbing all with which it comes into contact. Since Holst's death in 1934, those who knew him and who have written about him have given witness – though perhaps unwittingly – to his Mercurian attributes. There is always accent upon his mental life; physically frail and prone to illness, he was indefatigable in his curiosity and intellectual flights. His was not a brilliant personality, making him once again, according to the descriptions in Leo's book, a typical Mercurian; nor was he ever interested, compositionally, in fluency and pyrotechnics for their own sake. Slow and plodding in his work habits, he was often criticized late in his life for lacking spontaneity, for being too mechanical and dry. Early in his professional career, he fell into school teaching – the young ladies at St. Paul's Girls' School and, at Morley College, the working class – as a way to support his family. And this daily school work may well have contributed to his methodical ways, and might have played a part in the development of a technique which found beauty and cleverness in simple musical devices. But his schedule would have been exhausting and often tedious, giving him little scope and virtually no time for his own development as a serious composer.

But, on 15 November 1920, at Queen's Hall, London, there erupted a work by this seemingly dull and limited school teacher, composed in his spare time, which dazzled both music critics and audiences alike in a way not felt on English soil since Elgar's *Enigma Variations*; a work which continues to attract listeners today.

If the gap between Holst, as we *thought* we knew him, and this most vibrant of musical compositions seems too great, we have in part our historical mentality to blame; a mentality which gropes for firm watersheds and beacons

to lead the way forward. The history of *The Planets* as a musical force is, like Holst's life, filled with unexpected twists; and, like its composer, it fell victim to notoriety when it needed a more sensitive hearing. Holst's close friend and collaborator, the writer Clifford Bax, described the composer – in 1914, the year that *The Planets* was begun – as an apparent failure.<sup>1</sup> Yet, by 1914 there had been over forty public performances of his works (not counting various school concerts), many in London, with a number of pieces receiving repeat performances – this last feat being somewhat unusual for a young British composer. How is failure defined in the face of such apparent success? If Holst can be said to have been a failure, it would have been in his lack of works in “important” genres – symphonies, string quartets and others which were the foundation of the German “masterwork” tradition. Furthermore, those of his compositions which stemmed from nineteenth-century German practice did not project a distinctive, original “voice.” So the young composer, in the eyes of the critics, either failed to establish a place among the “best” (i.e. the German) composers, or he ignored those influences. His partsongs and folkloric works were English, and therefore of lesser stature in critical circles; his compositions based on Hindu scales and religious texts (the so-called “Sanskrit” works) were curious and original, but too far afield in their materials and rhetoric to find a place in serious musical discussions.

With *The Planets* there was no longer any doubt, for the English listener at any rate, as to Holst's success. His victory was both musical and political in that it represented a substantial relationship with the English audience as well as with reviewers and critics. In this work he was able to speak clearly and deeply to his audience, and the sense of authority projected by it moved them to trust in his musicianship. Likewise, his “language” – his musical materials and the various ways of relating and elaborating them – was consistent enough under the great variety of styles and characters to convince the critics of the composer's ability. But perhaps most important is the fact that Holst had found a way of using the conventions of nineteenth-century European music as a context for his own particular style, linking himself, finally, to the traditions esteemed so highly by the English musical community.

But in this success there is paradox, even irony. *The Planets* is both one of the most recognized, while at the same time one of the least known, works in the standard orchestral repertoire. Often spoken of – and certainly intended – as a single entity, it has been most often heard, and remembered, in fragments. Since Holst's death the work has remained critically ignored while parts of it have entered into the general cultural repository of musical signs. Such notoriety can be as much a curse as a blessing. For *The Planets*, it results



in a less than critical hearing, and the work loses its richness of character for the listener. It is only with a complete performance, and with a hearing which honors what the music itself has to say, that we can begin to fathom the work as a personal statement by this enigmatic composer.

The curious mixture of critical failure and popular success which characterizes the reception of *The Planets* points to the difference between critics and general listeners where new music was concerned. It seems paradoxical that a composition which has genuinely moved audiences for well over half a century could not be musically strong; yet the aesthetic stance of many critics – then as now – worked against a favorable hearing of the piece. The musical ideal, as articulated by such critics, and stemming from late nineteenth-century German discussions on the topic, was for a musical composition to exist as a pure structure – every note working in relation to all others in establishing a meaningful, though abstract, form. This ideal was based on a particular reading of the music of the great German symphonic tradition; programmatic music was a lesser art since it relied on ideas and statements outside of the musical structure. Likewise, any music the form of which could not be fixed within the structural tradition of the ideal was suspect. *The Planets*, in spite of its initial success with reviewers, was resistant to accepted analytical approaches. The structures of individual movements were loose and rambling; the musical progression was lacking in Beethovenian-style development; tonal grammar was difficult to hierarchize. Repeated attempts to discuss the work made it seem totally dependent on the titles and subtitles – its program.

Yet the fact remains: the music continues to excite listeners. The implication is that there was (and is) a strong musical experience which was resistant to traditional analysis and structural theory as they existed at the time. Furthermore, *The Planets*, and perhaps many similar works written in this century, can be seen to be governed by principles extending beyond German structuralist approaches. Had more sensitive analytical systems existed which could have explained how these pieces worked as musical communications, it is likely that they would have fared better in European critical circles. This book develops one such theory, which requires the old distinction between program music and abstract music to be reconsidered, and new concepts – musical metaphor, evolving structures and the like – to be developed. The basic structures and relationships of the music would take on rhetorical functions; in other words, rather than existing for themselves, they would work as part of a human communication. With such an analytical system, Holst's music speaks for itself, and we are able to hear what it has to say.

## Musical character and a theory of musical rhetoric

To speak of what the music itself has to say means to allow the musical action to communicate with us. This is an analytical issue, but not simply in the sense of parsing and classifying and judging against a textbook standard. While Holst compared himself to a mathematician working through a problem, he also was convinced that music should be a communication from composer to listener. He also felt that music could, in fact, speak for itself, without the help of program notes. *The Planets* was to make its appeal to the audience without any explanation from the composer. It was a series of “mood pictures,” he was to say in a lecture some years after the piece was premiered, with the movements acting as foils for one another. They were to be “embodiments” of the characters suggested by their subtitles. At the same time, he did not consider them program music – they imitated no real-world event or personality, they narrated no extra-musical plot. This distinction between communication and program is at the heart of the analytical issue, and it brings the discussion into the realm of rhetoric, the craft of expressive communication.

The titles and subtitles of *The Planets* were not, for the composer, a programmatic touch; they were metaphors. That is to say, as in literary theory, they embodied character through the action of some agent not naturally associated with it. In music, this agent would be the actions embodied in the materials of the particular composition. There are some programmatic touches in *The Planets*, for example the snare-drum cadence and the trumpet fanfares in *Mars* imitating the sounds of an army going into battle. But *Mars* does not narrate a particular battle; rather, the musical events – the chromatic inflections and ramblings, the insistent but unconventional rhythmic figures – act as metaphors of the emotive and psychological states which we associate with the idea of war. In other words, there is an actual battle taking place within the abstract world of the music, a war on its own terms, not those of the real world; and our attention to that struggle invokes in us, the listeners, a vicarious response and an understanding of the parallels between the world of the music and our own.

Of course, Holst was not the first to use musical figures or style to project character or to represent some real-world condition. By the time *The Planets* was composed, there was already a longstanding tradition of musical rhetoric of which Strauss’s programmatic works can be considered only the most exaggerated examples. In the symphonic tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the repository of topical associations – of styles and

figures linked to social status and activities, religion, military life and the like – was very large indeed, and we can see in the works of the most respected composers of the era – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and then Schubert and Schumann – how their treatment of topical idioms might have directed and enhanced their communication with an audience.<sup>2</sup> The use of topics would have created a link for the audience between the music and the outside world; yet the music would not be considered programmatic, as the topics acted as metaphors rather than depictions of real-world situations. The concept of topic can also be used to demonstrate the rhetorical “problem” faced by these composers: their music was often filled with too varied a range of materials and treatments within a single piece for the audience to conceive the music as integrated, and therefore meaningful. By juxtaposing topical gestures chock-a-block, and by altering them unexpectedly or in ways considered inappropriate by the audience, the composers pushed metaphor to its limits, forcing the listener to go against intuition and conventional experience. Resolution to a minor chord, for example, said something with reference to the apparent darkness of the chord and the feel of “solution” and “resolution,” and, metaphorically, about the topic with which it was associated. In other words, the relative quality and feel of chord, mode, key relations, rhythmic character, or whatever else was used, said something about the topic which appears in the musical context, and the relative difficulty or dissonance exhibited becomes, through metaphor, part of the unique character given to the topic. In the late works of Mozart and Beethoven the greatly distended sense of various topics and the unconventional treatment of them were likely causes of the confusion with which the music was first met.

With Schubert and Schumann, and those who followed them, the process began to involve more personal associations and more individual formulations of topical idiom. But the process of metaphorizing remained essentially the same; and when Wagner stated that every part and detail of the music was to be an original idea or the consequence of an original idea as music took on a “truth function,” he was recommissioning metaphor as the essential artistic function.<sup>3</sup>

Holst's musical rhetoric can be seen as an outgrowth of this tradition, particularly through his early affinity for Wagnerian harmony and melodic grammar, seen in such works as *The Mystic Trumpeter* (1904) and *The Cloud Messenger* (1913). But it was also through that nineteenth-century model that he came into contact with a quite different source, Symbolist theory. The chief proponent of Symbolist concepts in music was Debussy, and after him, Skryabin, both of whom were well known to London audiences. For Debussy,

the Symbolists' use of words as "open" metaphors led to an affective representation which was a model for his intuitive and grammatically free musical constructions. Likewise, Wagner's *leitmotif* system, as a means of organizing both emotive plot and musical development, parallels (indeed, was a source for) Symbolist concepts.<sup>4</sup> A study of the processes in Holst's music, in conjunction with his verbal clues, demonstrates the Symbolist model clearly.<sup>5</sup> One example is his affinity for embedding compositions within a distancing "frame," which reflects a rhetorical outlook similar to Debussy's, although the musical materials may have differed. Many of the Sanskrit works (such as the opera *Savitri* [1908] and the *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* [1908–12]), as well as the mystical *Planets*, *Venus* and *Neptune*, project this idea, but purportedly non-mystical works make use of it as well: *A Somerset Rhapsody* (1906–7), the third movement of *Beni Mora* (1909–10), *Saturn*, *The Choral Symphony* (1925), *Egdon Heath* (1927), *Hammersmith* (1931), and the *Lyric Movement* (1933), to name the important works.<sup>6</sup> These compositions all begin with such quiet, often monophonic expressions that the silence from which they emerge is palpable. The openings remove the rest of the piece from the everyday world and guide the listener to a recognizable but utterly separate world within. This device allowed Holst to use conventional musical symbols in new ways and, particularly, to use prosaic material – silly dance tunes and awkward, rough-cut gestures – to poetic (which is to say, metaphoric) ends. The frame allowed all within it to be subject to transformation, including genre itself, and all aspects of the music functioned as metaphor.

Seen in this light, musical character is not simply the result of fixed associations with the physical world. When purposefully chosen musical gestures are set in purposeful relationships with one another, musical character can be said to arise. The connection with the "real world" – the program – will be developed only as a jumping-off place into the separate world of the music. Such a strategy is in keeping with literary theory of the day – for example, in the essays of E. M. Forster and Henry James – which emphasizes the importance of a character's structural function over an imitative one. James discusses the need to keep some of his characters superficial so that they will not detract from more important aspects of his plot, and even his main characters will be stripped of all but those features which are necessary to the unfolding of their stories. Such a relationship between character and structure gives a story a stronger sense of reality and individuality, even if the plot follows conventional lines. This provides the final point in Holst's method, the relationship between structure and character. Ultimately, an appreciation of musical character requires that it be

understood as the natural result of *musical action*, and the listener's perception of that action.

Such actions need to be controlled and guided by a structure, specifically one which arises from the particulars of the musical characters themselves. Thus, musical gestures – rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and others – are not dropped into a pre-existent form; rather, the structure evolves out of their musical (as opposed to real-world) qualities, just as a literary plot is derived from its characters (as opposed to “real persons”) and their propensities. Holst was quite clear on this point. He considered form not tied to content as “cold storage”; and formal analysis was “quite interesting and not dangerous as long as you do not imagine that it has any direct bearing on Art.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, expressive power is based on the *sensitivity* as well as on the strength of the structure. In Holst's case, his control was far greater than the aesthetic product at first suggests, though his critics often found him too calculating. With regard to *The Planets*, his audience's response was a far stronger witness to the efficacy of both his structures and his rhetoric.

Always practical, Holst tried to match a systemic rigor with rhetorical immediacy, and it was common, with his late works, to find critics admitting that the composer had said exactly what he meant to say but that they themselves were unable to find words to express it. This situation was often explained by invoking “intuition,” yet Holst's work-a-day methods suggest otherwise. The composer's approach was easily construed as intuitive because the listener was induced to establish the proper context for interpreting the music without attention being called to the fact. For example, in *The Planets* it is the unusual tonal and formal situations one encounters from the very beginning which invoke the necessary nineteenth-century conventions simply by breaking the rules so obviously. In a late work such as *Egdon Heath* (1927), the same is true: the opening line follows a tortured tonal/modal path while being organized at a higher, but still perceivable, level around the conventional tonic-dominant polarity. These events are not announced within the rhetoric expected of tonal music, and so they make their mark subliminally. Furthermore, Holst began to make allusions to his own personal style, his own way of dealing with current “topics.” This results in such stylistic allusions as “folk” and “varieties,” and personal feelings concerning the mystical or ecstatic states being perceived by the astute listener without overt extra-musical images coming to mind. This is certainly suggested by a reading of reviewers' comments; they consistently maintain a narrow range of metaphor, while pronouncing the music unfathomable.

By starting from the implied – and perhaps we can say intuited – metaphors,

it is possible to follow the expansive and emotive journey embodied by *The Planets*, from the *physical, aggressive and profligate* to the *mystical, passive and stoic* experience which lingers as the final strains of *Neptune* evaporate in space around us. The analysis which unfolds in the following chapters will demonstrate that the music does not simply provide "signs" of these states of being; rather, it projects a formal progression which, when placed against nineteenth-century conventions, yields the sense of those states. A nineteenth-century context is assumed because of Holst's background and environment and because of the formal and tonal evidence within the music. The piece is discussed in psychological terms rather than standard programmatic terms because the interpretive experience is based less on the objective result of the music and more on the listener's inner struggle to synthesize events and a convention which accounts for all of the musical action.

Is Holst's conception in *The Planets*, then, one of human psychological phases? There is a striking similarity of outlook between Holst and his *Planets*, as we hear them proceed. Each movement can be held up against Holst's life as a mirror: the rigid lock-step of his over-scheduled life was an oppressive ordeal for him, leading ultimately to a nervous breakdown; but the peacefulness of love, of human relationships, while comforting and beautiful, was essentially inert and non-productive. The fleet-footedness of his mind and its restless fancy was a welcome universe which bore fruit, and it led to great celebration, physical and energizing. At the same time, Holst had a great preoccupation with an acceptance of one's destiny, and it led to a cultivation of a stoicism which left him apparently insensitive and cold. The paradox is that such a state of mind could exist side by side with the tomfoolery of *Uranus*, but ultimately all gives way before the mystical state which the composer apparently sought continually in the act of composition. This seemingly passive state was not inert for him, nor anti-intellectual; its summing up of all the threads of life in a single conceptualization was an annihilation of physical time and space. It granted him, perhaps, such vision that it was worth the loss of reputation and popularity which he was to sustain in later life.

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## *Holst and the two Londons*

When Gustav Holst came up to London from the West Country in 1893, he entered a world far removed from provincial life. There were, perhaps, always two Londons for the young Holst: the rather formal environment of the Royal College of Music and the kaleidoscopic world of Hammersmith where he lodged as a student. The first concentrated him on serious music and the past; Charles Villiers Stanford, his composition teacher at the College, enclosed his students in a worldview culminating in the music of Brahms.<sup>1</sup> The second world was filled with a happy and perhaps vulgar culture; music halls, varieties and all forms of popular music. He appears to have happily kept a foot in both camps, for the two worlds are often found side by side in his music, and the tension between the two was a fundamental influence as the composer forged his personal style.

These two worlds were, in reality, but two aspects of Victorian London, highbrow and lowbrow. Edwardian London, with its rising middle class, was characterized by a merging of these two cultural strains, giving birth to a well-crafted popular style and the potential for the language of the folktune and the sentimental ballad to be molded into a more intense and serious artistic statement.

There was a gap of seven years between the time Holst began work on *The Planets* and the first public performance in 1920, meaning that it was conceived in a London clinging to a fast fading Edwardian spirit, but born and raised in the new world of post-war Europe. It can be argued that the work owes its peculiar amalgamation of styles and idioms to the way in which Holst lived his life in the earlier period and to the city's influence on him. Yet it is equally true that the work owes its success to the greater openness and stronger passions of what was eventually to be called the Jazz Age.

### London before the war

By 1913, the classical music scene in London was quite lively, as can be seen from the programming of a single fortnight.<sup>2</sup> Balfour Gardiner had begun his

concert series to promote the music of English composers. His concert of March 4th included works of Percy Grainger, Vaughan Williams, Arnold Bax, and J. B. McEwen. The most important work of the concert, according to *The Times*, was Holst's *The Cloud Messenger*. The following evening Donald Tovey presented one of his "Chelsea" concerts consisting of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, op. 54, Brahms's G minor Piano Quartet, op. 25, and Tovey's own *Air and Variations* for string quartet. On the 9th, Wood's Queen's Hall Orchestra played a mixed program of Beethoven, Strauss, Ponchielli, Saint-Saëns, Wagner, and Coleridge-Taylor; while on Monday, the 10th, the LSO played Smetana, Tchaikovsky, Vivaldi, Glazunov, and Wagner's *Rienzi* Overture. Also on the 10th, Beecham gave a performance of Delius's *Mass of Life*. March 12th saw Busoni playing an all-Chopin recital, and two nights later Beecham joined Josef Holbrooke in a program consisting almost entirely of the young composer's works, including excerpts from *Apollo and the Seaman*, the prelude to his opera *Dylan*, the tone poem *Ulalume*, and, as a finale, *Queen Mab*. On the afternoon of the 15th, Wood conducted a substantial program: Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik*, Bach's Violin Concerto in E, Beethoven's *Eroica*, the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and Strauss's tone poem *Don Juan*. To close off the fortnight, Balfour Gardiner provided another program of English music, with Bantock's *Fifine at the Fair*, Bax's *In the Fairy Hills*, Delius's Piano Concerto in C minor, the première of Austin's E major Symphony, and Gardiner's own *Shepherd Fennel's Dance*.

This diversity of programming is reflected in the wide-ranging style of *The Planets*; and one must understand the kaleidoscopic nature of the London music scene in order to appreciate how well the composer has shaped it to his purpose. What has not been mentioned yet in this description of musical life in Edwardian London is the overwhelming presence of popular music. It must be dealt with in order to grasp fully Holst's accomplishment with *The Planets*, for the work was clearly a popular success, regardless of its rather short-lived critical acclaim.

Vaughan Williams told a story of a naval officer visiting

a lonely station on the Yorkshire coast inhabited only by a storekeeper and his wife. "You must be very lonely here," he said. "Yes, we depend a lot on our wireless." "What do you enjoy most on the wireless?" "Beethoven and Holst."<sup>3</sup>

This is not only a tribute to Holst's apparent standing at the height of his fame; it also sums up the whole of the rising middle class and its artistic tastes. While not specifically trained in music, the middle class could begin to relate to the more accessible of the classics, because their own popular idioms were nothing



less than simple applications of the same language. Conversely, popular music became more sophisticated as composers became better trained. It is easy to smirk at the popular music of the time, especially as it is recalled in today's varieties and panto styles. But it must be remembered that the sources of the music were wide ranging and distinctions became blurred. The difference between the "shop ballad" (songs to be sung by amateurs at home) and Viennese light opera or Italian *opera buffa* was obscured by the well-crafted and singable tunes being written by otherwise "serious" composers such as Stanford (who was Holst's composition teacher at the RCM), Frederick Cowen, and Arthur Sullivan.<sup>4</sup> This crossing of styles – popular, folk, and light classical – allowed the middle class to indulge a vernacular propensity while developing their appreciation for the classics. Furthermore, much of the serious English music was, in terms of language, very close to a popular idiom, if more sophisticated in formal procedure.

Holst himself wrote and had published what he called "potboilers," an activity he regretted as time-wasting. Nevertheless, the *rhetorical* strategy remained with him; he continued occasionally to compose in what he dubbed a "lighter style," including such works as *Two Songs Without Words* (1906) and *Beni Mora* (1909–10).<sup>5</sup> These works were not potboilers, for they did not cater to popular taste; rather, they built upon it. Ultimately, this was to become a strategy in the writing of *The Planets*.

### Holst in London – to 1914

When Holst first arrived in London he already thought of himself as a composer, having scored a success with an operetta entitled *Lansdown Castle, or the Sorcerer of Tewkesbury*. The music was judged to be somewhat in the style of Sullivan and more than one reviewer held up the work as evidence of great talent, and even genius. This appraisal by the provincial press was, at the very least, balanced by the difficulties of student life in London. Time spent at serious composition was equalled by time and energy spent making enough money to live. He worked as a trombonist in resort bands at Brighton and elsewhere; he wrote songs and partsongs – his potboilers – for extra money; he was organist at several churches. The variety of experience was enervating, but it set the pattern for his life until the success of *The Planets* earned him some breathing space. He managed to keep separate his different compositional styles, and he steadfastly pursued serious music as his ultimate goal.

In 1907, already carrying a full load between the James Allen School and St.