

GUSTAV HOLST

(continued from p. 190).

It is of the essence of modern music as of all modern thought to drive straight to the root of the matter in hand without artifice or subterfuge—to let the matter rule the form not the form the matter—to obtain our rules from practice, not our practice from rules. Holst, as we have seen, is a practical musician, he knows what he wants to say and uses the most direct way of saying it. If he desires that a melody shall sound remote from its harmonic context he does not hesitate to make it remote—he does not compromise by making it look as if it “fitted.” Equally, if he so wishes, he uses successions of sevenths or triads without any attempt to disguise them into respectability. I cannot illustrate this better than by two quotations from “The Planets” (Examples 7 and 8).

Ex. 7.
Adagio. (Harp & Flute.) SATURN.

p

C. Bass.

etc.

Ex. 8. *Allegro.* MARR.

The musical score is written for a piano and features a 5/4 time signature. It is marked 'Allegro' and 'ff' (fortissimo). The score is divided into three systems. The first system has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The third system features a more complex texture with multiple voices in the treble staff and a rhythmic accompaniment in the bass staff. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'ff'.

A large and important part of Holst's musical work consists of settings of hymns and lyrics from the Rig Veda and other Sanscrit poetry.* The fact that the originals of these poems are oriental has led people to expect a sort of pseudo-orientalism in his music. Nothing could be further either from his intention or his achievement. Holst has written only one definite piece of orientalism, namely, the brilliant *tour-de-force* "Beni Mora," a work which if it had been played in Paris instead of London would have given

* "Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda," op. 26, four groups (Stainer and Bell). "The Cloud Messenger," op. 30 (Stainer and Bell). "Hymns from the Rig Veda" for solo voice (op. 24, Chester).

its composer an European reputation, and played in Italy would probably have caused a riot. (It will hardly be believed that neither this work nor "The Planets" has yet found a publisher.) But it is not the orientalism but the mysticism of the Vedic Hymns which attracted Holst, he needed some expression of the mystical point of view less materialised and less systematised than anything to be found in occidental liturgies. In the Rig Veda personification of the unknown is reduced to a minimum.

" He the primal one
Begetter of the universe
Begotten in mystery

How shall we name him
When we offer sacrifice."

These settings of Eastern texts culminate in the magnificent choral song "The Cloud Messenger," but the spirit which dictates them is in all essentials the same which prompted his musical expression in the "Hymn of Jesus" and the "Ode to Death."*

The mystical frame of mind naturally begets a certain austerity in Holst's later music. Austerity is sometimes a cover for artistic impotence; the composer says "I will not" when he means "I cannot." This negative austerity is not, of course, what I refer to here. Holst is never negative, his very faults are those of commission not of omission. His austerity leads not to dullness or emptiness, but to harmony which is acrid rather than luscious, melody sometimes angular but never indefinite or sugary, orchestration which is brilliant and virile but not cloying.

Among the purely musical influences which have affected Holst we may count a boyish devotion to Grieg which influenced his student work and occasionally crops up even in his later music, without in the least detracting from its individuality.† Again it goes without saying that Holst, like every young musician who approached manhood in 1890, came strongly under the influence of Wagner, the chief relic of this influence is the three-act opera "Sita" in which much beautiful music lies hidden in a rather intractable form.

That Holst knows and loves his Bach is evident from the following quotation from the comparatively early "Mystic Trumpeter."‡

* "Ode to Death" (words by Walt Whitman) set for chorus and orchestra.

† e.g. "Battle Hymn" ("Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda," Group 1, No. 2).

‡ "The Mystic Trumpeter," op. 18, scena for soprano and orchestra (words by Walt Whitman).



It was to a mind thus familiar, both as student and performer, with all the most modern devices of music that a new field of thought was opened in the lately re-discovered works of Purcell followed by the publication of the masses and motets of Byrde and Dr. Fellowes's great edition of the English madrigalists. These came as a revelation to Holst, as to many other musicians; he quickly imbibed their spirit without abating one jot of his individuality or in any way harking back to a sham archaism. We can see the spirit of his great ancestors in such works as the "Hymn of Jesus" or the opening of "Hecuba's Lament."*

Another very marked influence on Holst's musical thought must not be omitted here. The subject of English folk-song is a thorny one and has been much misunderstood. It would be out of place to discuss it at length here; but this much may be said, that, to those who have understanding, the folk-song is a liberating and not a fettering influence. The contact with new types of melody bound by purely melodic considerations, with rhythms not tied by the convention of bars and time signatures, the expressiveness of short and simple tunes—all this cannot fail to suggest to anyone who is naturally sympathetic new vistas of musical thought which may, indeed, have nothing to do superficially with the curves and cadences of folk-song, but are suggested by its spirit if not by its

* "Hecuba's Lament" (Gilbert Murray) set for soprano solo, female chorus and orchestra, op. 31, No. 1.

letter. Holst's first introduction to his traditional melodies was in a collection of songs from Hampshire which he harmonized at the request of the late Dr. Gardiner. Such arrangements as the following must have come as rather a shock to those accustomed to the unpretending harmonies of "English County Songs" or "Folk Songs from Somerset," and it must be confessed that they are not too well suited to their immediate purpose.

Ex. 10. JOHN BARLEYCORN.

They ploughed him in, they harrowed him in With

p *staccato.*

elods all o-ver his head; And

But Holst was finding out what folk-song had to say to him and what he had to say to it, and in his latest essay in this form, the beautiful setting of the "White Paternoster" tune, the melody and its treatment are absolutely at one.

Whatever the influence may have been it is obvious that Holst has freed himself from all conventions in the matter of rhythm and melody. If the nature of the musical idea or the accent of the words requires a rhythm of seven or five (rather than the accepted four, three or six) he does not hesitate to employ such rhythms—indeed, rhythms of five or seven are characteristic of much of his later work. He often employs what we call for want of a better word "modal" melodies (that is in other modes than the major and minor). Many people seem to consider that "modal" melody and its corresponding harmony is a return to something archaic. We are told in the text books that the harmony of Palestrina and

his school is "modal." This, surely, is a fallacy. The two great sources of modal melody are the plain-song and the folk-song, and for this reason, that they are both purely melodic in their conception (the major and minor modes grew up from harmonic considerations). Now the music of the great choral period originates in attempts to harmonize these purely melodic plain-song tunes—but for some reason which no one has, as far as I know, investigated these early harmonists found that the intervals of the melodic modes did not fit in with their harmonic scheme, and they accordingly altered the intervals to suit their purpose in accordance with the system known as "*musica ficta*," until the various modes all merged into the major and minor of the great classical period, and (except for one or two experiments such as Beethoven's Lydian Hymn) up to quite modern times the major and minor modes were the basis of all music.

The harmonic possibilities of the purely melodic modes occurred, probably, first to the nationalist Russian composers; following on them we find Erik Satie using them in his earlier works; and from him, in turn, Debussy obtained suggestions for such things as his *Sarabande* and the "*Fille aux cheveux de lin*."

Here is an example of a melody full of modal suggestion from Holst's "*Savitri*."*

Ex. 11. SAVITRI.

TENOR VOICE.

Oh, the trees that stand so proud - ly Know not I bring their dead - ly foe.
 'Tis mine axe, that's teeling near them, With but one stroke could lay them low.

ORCHESTRA.

Farewell, friend, un - til the morn, to a fair - er love I go.

* "*Savitri*" (Opera di Camera). Op. 25.

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of two systems. The first system has a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'G' (Allegretto). The lyrics are 'Greet - ing to thee, my lov - - ing Sa - vi - tri,'. The piano accompaniment has a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics 'What wife in all the world is like to Sa - vi - tri!.....'. The piano accompaniment continues with a similar melodic line. The score ends with a double bar line.

It is sometimes argued that the particular idiom which a composer uses is a mere accident, that the fountain of inspiration flows or does not flow as the case may be, and that the particular vessel into which it flows is of no consequence. But idiom is part of the inspiration; it is not enough to have great emotions, the true way of materialising these emotions has also to be found. Many a composer who has had potentially much to say has failed because he did not discover the vocabulary from which he could choose the necessary means of expression. Of course, every true composer makes his own idiom. But bricks are not to be made without straw; and it cannot be doubted that the folk-song with its melodic curves, its free rhythm, its simplicity and its sincerity has played its humble part in giving a tendency and direction to many composers to whom it was naturally sympathetic.

I am far from saying that there are no weak points in Holst's music—what piece of music has not its weak points? Did not Wagner fail at the very climax of his life work? When Brünnhilde throws herself on the flames as an act of supreme sacrifice some superhumanly beautiful melody was the only possible musical equivalent—but at that moment Wagner could invent nothing better than a tune which is hardly good enough for a third rate German beer garden. Indeed I can think of no piece of music

(with the possible exception of the "Sanctus" from Palestrina's "Missa Brevis") which can be said to be absolutely without flaw.

Holst's weaknesses are the defects of his qualities—occasionally his magnificent technique masters him and the end gets lost in the means. Sometimes he spoils the noble simplicity of his work by an unnecessary piece of elaboration; at other times the very individuality of his thought which requires such a personal technique causes a flaw in his work; in his earlier music especially we do not always find complete unity of idea and expression; the *mot juste* fails him for the moment and he falls back on the common stock of musical device. But the very fact that these lapses are noticeable only goes to show how individual his music is. As time goes on these discrepancies get fewer and fewer and his style gets maturer, simpler and more individual, and this individuality shows through all his music; whether it is in the most extreme harmonic and rhythmical thought of the "Planets" or the absolute simplicity of the "Four Carols,"* his signature is plain on every page.

There may be occasional moments in Holst's harmony which are not quite in the approved "grand manner." Sometimes we are pulled up in the middle of his most beautiful work by a melodic phrase which appears undistinguished (as for example a phrase in the "Hymn of Jesus" which has been adversely criticised). But these blemishes (if they are such) are the direct outcome of his vitality—he will never be content to say "nothing in particular and say it very well." If the harmony occasionally exhibits an error of style, it is because the intention at that moment became over-exuberant; if the melodic inspiration does not quite always hit the mark (as happens to all composers at times) it is because the composer is too honest and too whole hearted to hide it under an indistinct muttering in the accepted style.

Holst's three last important works, "The Planets," the "Hymn of Jesus" and the "Ode to Death," seem to sum up the whole of his aims; they exhibit in mature and perfected forms all that he has been striving for with more or less success in his earlier works. To one who has had the privilege of his friendship for the last twenty-five years, and has seen most of his compositions actually in the course of completion, it has been most interesting to watch the growth to maturity of a set, though perhaps unconscious, artistic purpose, to see experiments, at first perhaps not wholly successful, develop into finished methods of artistic expression, to see crudities gradually disappear and give place to maturity.

I cannot show this development better than by two quotations

* "Four Carols" (Schmidt—New York).

in which the same musical thought is evident, one from the early "Mystic Trumpeter" and the other from "Venus" (the bringer of peace).

Ex. 12. *Andante.* MYSTIC TRUMPETER.

The fret-ting world the streets, the noi - sy hours of day with -

draw.

pp

Ex. 13. *Adagio.* 8va.....: VENUS.

p Fl. & Ob. pp

Horns.

The image contains two musical excerpts. Ex. 12, titled 'Mystic Trumpeter', is marked 'Andante' and features a vocal line with the lyrics 'The fret-ting world the streets, the noi - sy hours of day with -'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'p'. Ex. 13, titled 'Venus', is marked 'Adagio' and features instrumental parts for Flute and Oboe (marked 'p') and Horns (marked 'pp'). The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, time signatures, and dynamic markings.

The musical score is for the beginning of the 'Mars' movement from 'The Planets' by Gustav Holst. It is written for a large orchestra. The top system shows the first violin and second violin/cello/bass parts. The second system shows the woodwinds (Flute and Harp) and strings (Harp and Horns) entering. The third system shows the brass (Horns and Bassoons) entering. The score is marked with dynamics like 'p' (piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo). The key signature has two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The time signature is 4/4. The score is labeled 'sta.' at the end of the first system.

"The Planets" consists of seven orchestral movements named after the seven planets with their various astrological characteristics. They are named—

- (1). Mars (the bringer of war).
- (2). Venus (the bringer of peace).
- (3). Mercury (the winged messenger).
- (4). Jupiter (the bringer of jollity).
- (5). Saturn (the bringer of old age).
- (6). Uranus (the magician).
- (7). Neptune (the mystic).

They are in no sense programme music, the titles suggest the general character of the music and no more. The most individual and beautiful seem to me to be Venus (though the middle section is not quite so good as the rest), Saturn, Jupiter and Neptune. Mercury is very brilliant and Uranus will probably be considered "great fun," but to my mind they are not musically up to the level of the rest. Holst uses a very large orchestra in the "Planets" not to make his score look impressive, but because he needs the extra tone colour and knows how to use it.

The text of the "Hymn of Jesus" is taken from the apocryphal

"Acts of St. John" and is almost ideal for musical setting. It is probably part of some early ritual (perhaps a mystical dance, as the words suggest) and consists chiefly of a series of antiphonal phrases with an ever recurrent "Amen." Holst has used two choruses which sing antiphonally for the most part—joining forces occasionally for a great outburst on the words "Glory to Thee." There is also a semi-chorus which sings the recurring "Amen." Many musicians have set the "Amen" to music—from the unknown composer of the "Dresden" Amen down to the too well-known composer of the "Sevenfold" Amen. In this hierarchy Holst's "Amen" will surely take a high place by reason of its aetherial beauty.

Ex. 14. HYMN OF JESUS.

pp A men.....

pp A men.....

Col 8va.....

[The "Ode to Death" is a setting for chorus and orchestra of part of Whitman's "President Lincoln's Funeral Hymn." This has not yet been published or performed. Like the "Hymn of Jesus" it is a real work for chorus and orchestra—the orchestra is not occupied in doubling (and drowning) the chorus parts, but plays its independent part—the choral technique is characteristic of Holst at his best. I quote the following from it.

Ex. 15. CHORUS.

ODE TO DEATH.

pp And the soul turn-ing to thee, O vast and well veil'd

ORCHESTRA.

(Organ pedal.)

death..... and the bo - dy grate-ful-ly

Harp.

Strings.

ppp

nest - ling close to thee

Oboe.

Flute.

ppp

These three works represent Holst in his latest and maturest stage. What the future may have in store we cannot say—whether he will become simpler, or whether he will lead us into new paths where it will be difficult to follow ; but of this we may be sure that there will be good reason behind whatever he does. He will not be simple merely through timidity, nor will he seek out strange devices merely for the sake of eccentricity ; he knows too well that whatever the future of music may be, it will always grow out of its great past.

R. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS.