

Holst – Astrology and Modernism in ‘The Planets’

The subject of modernism in early 20th-century British music is rarely examined: partly because it is often thought that British composers were not interested in the Modern Movement before World War I, and partly because in discussing Modernism (a convenient umbrella term for the whole cultural avant-garde whose components included Expressionism, Futurism, Primitivism and Surrealism) one must be prepared to engage subjects which, in this country, are normally considered *Verboten*. There is no doubt, for instance, that the development of the Modern Movement on the Continent was partly inspired by a widespread awareness of Theosophy, and the interest, which it encouraged, in such esoteric areas as Indian philosophy and astrology. In this article I want to look at this aspect of Modernism in relation to Gustav Holst, and especially in *The Planets* (1914–16): his, and British music’s, first striking testament to the Modernist outlook. The very bases of this work are Holst’s understanding of astrology, his friendships of the time, and his Theosophical upbringing.

Founded in the last two decades of the 19th century by the Russian Elena Petrovna Blavatskaya (Blavatsky), Theosophy became one of the leading movements of the period. Through her books *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and articles in the *Theosophical Journal*, Blavatsky became influential throughout Europe. She founded Theosophy to counter what many felt to be the corrupted teachings of the various Christian churches, and the churches’ inability to deal with Darwinism and Scientific Materialism. Blavatsky wanted to show something different. She endeavoured to show that ‘Nature is not a fortuitous concurrence of atoms’. Also she wanted to ‘rescue the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions’ and ‘to show that the occult side of Nature has never been approached by the science of modern civilization’. Thus Theosophy encouraged the re-assessment of cultural values; and this led to the investigation of many other non-European cultures. Indian culture and philosophy was specially attractive because it was thought to be so much older than all others, and its vedic literature the oldest surviving in the

world.¹ In turn Theosophy encouraged the re-evaluation of other subjects which had long lain dormant in the West: subjects such as astrology, sacred dance, gnostic literature, non-European mythologies and phrenology. Implicit in Blavatsky’s ideas is the necessity of a new art for a new age. The tenets of Theosophy were derived from Indian sources and consisted of a belief in Karma, Reincarnation and Dharma. All his life Holst adhered to these tenets, which he initially derived from his stepmother.² They determined his choices, and, together with socialism, encouraged his committed teaching life. In music they fortified his desire to explore new ground, and also his disdain for earthly honours.³

Such a reassessment appealed to the putative leaders of what was to become the Modern Movement; Kandinsky, Klee, Mondriaan, Alban Berg, Gropius, Itten, Zemlinsky as well as others like W.B. Yeats. Scriabin’s Theosophical orientation is well documented. Schoenberg, though less overt a follower, was undoubtedly a

¹ Quotations from E. Blavatsky, Preface to *The Secret Doctrine*, London, 1888. For the general fascination with Indian culture at the turn of the century see my article ‘Holst and India (I), *Maya to Sita*’ in *Tempo* 158 (September 1986), especially pp.2–4. The wider significance of the late-19th-century resurgence of esoteric ideas as background to a surprisingly wide range of 20th-century music has yet to be systematically studied, though some recent writers (eg Robert Orledge, Roy Howat) have recognized its importance as a formative influence on Satie, whose Rosicrucianism is well known, and Debussy (33rd Grand Master of the Rosicrucian Prieuré de Sion), who certainly studied Hermetic philosophy, astrology and numerology, which bore fruit in his use of Golden Section.

² ‘Gustav Holst’s religious ideas were based on Buddhism, and he believed in detachment from love and hate, pleasure and pain. This influence reached him and me from the same source when he was in his late teens. ...’: letter from Holst’s brother Matthias R. von Holst to *Music and Letters* (32/3, July 1951, p.302). (Matthias incidentally contradicts Imogen Holst’s assertion that the origin of Holst’s neuritis was in his over-practising. He asserts it was due to music-copying to earn enough to buy meals in his youth.)

³ ‘He was a real lover of mankind and of the struggling man. I so well remember his saying how much he respected and admired the courage of the city dweller and even the city plants trees and flowers’. Previously unpublished letter from Megan Foster, a singer and friend of Holst, to Diana Oldridge (née Awdrey), 27 July 1976.

sympathizer as his correspondence with Kandinsky shows. Webern also may well have been influenced by Theosophical thought (he is known to have admired Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical movement) for his work displays the same principles that Blavatsky espoused: a desire to return to first principles and to deal with essences. He, like Schoenberg, Zemlinsky, Alban Berg and the architect Adolf Loos ('less is more') were close friends of Oskar Adler (1874-1955). Adler, a doctor, was a fine violinist who regularly played in quartets with Schoenberg and Franz Schmidt; he was Schoenberg's first teacher (although they were the same age) – and also an astrologer and a Theosophist. Although not a composer, Adler evidently felt there must be a new music for a new age. It does seem as if he perhaps acted as a philosophical catalyst. In his *Critique of Pure Music*, completed in 1918 but not published until 30 years later, Adler recalled the deep philosophical discussions about music that he and Schoenberg used to have. It appears as if he fortified the latter's attitude and encouraged his composer-friends to develop in a particular way and gave practical help by performing their music in public. In later life Schoenberg acknowledged the 'great role' that he owed his friend Adler in his own 'evolution' and for 'a great many matters he taught me'.⁴ These composers were to create new approaches to music, and the influence of Adler and Theosophy in this cannot be doubted.

In England there were few composers who were concerned with the developing of a new art in the early years of the 20th century. But Holst was one, John Foulds another and Cyril Scott yet another. All three were Theosophists, or had had a Theosophical background. Thus they were perhaps consciously (but more probably, unconsciously) connected to the new ideas on the continent emanating from Vienna. In his own music Scott was more concerned with French harmonic influences, but in *The Philosophy of Modernism*, published in 1917, he was well aware of the important issues that beset the modern composer. He advocated the abandoning of time signatures, key signatures, melody and old forms, but thought the most important attitude for the modern composer was courage and creative

enterprise. Scott certainly had friends in Vienna and one of his pieces was played at Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical performances in 1919. John Foulds had travelled to Munich in 1910 to hear the first performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, was an admirer of the work of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, and since the 1890s had been interested in microtonal possibilities and 'devic' music.⁵ Later he lived in Paris in the 1920s, meeting among others Varèse, who had esoteric leanings of his own. Like Foulds, Holst was inspired by the music of Schoenberg and Stravinsky (after a performance of his remarkable orchestral work *Phantastes* in 1912 one critic called Holst the 'English Stravinsky') and also by the lucidity of Ravel. In the 1920s, at a time when his friend Vaughan Williams had reached a stylistic plateau, Holst became 'much fascinated by the eerie hints and whispers of the music of Anton Webern'.⁶

These modern-minded British composers shared Theosophical backgrounds, interests in astrology, and sympathy to other cultures, especially the Indian. In this they were quite different from the composers who are normally thought of as representing the best in English music of the time: Elgar, Delius, Stanford, Parry, Vaughan Williams and Bax. Not one of these was ever thought of as a Modernist of any kind. By contrast Holst, Scott and Foulds have at various times been considering 'advanced', and their music is now somewhat neglected. Here I want to investigate the particular interest Holst had in astrology and how it resulted in the striking modernism of *The Planets*. Central to this work lies Holst's own understanding of astrology, which has not been previously explored in any detail.

Self-doubt, and an inner desire to explore and not accept received opinions, could leave Holst floundering and questioning the basis of his life. On one such occasion in 1892, when he had failed to get into the Trinity College of Music, he consulted a phrenologist (a speciality favoured by Theosophists).⁷ In January 1908, when his monumental opera *Sita* failed to win the Ricordi prize, he was nearly inconsolable. By 1912 his

⁴ Erwin Stein, ed., *Arnold Schoenberg Letters* (London: Faber 1964), p.254. See also Willi Reich, *Schoenberg: a Critical Biography* (London: Longman 1971), pp.250-2. Recently Louis Krasner wrote to me (letter dated 20 June 1993) that Adler's violin playing was 'simply divine' and 'all of artistic and cultural Vienna came to him for counsel'. Krasner is also quoted on Adler as an astrologer in Geoffrey Poole, 'Alban Berg and the Fatal Number', *Tempo* 179 p.2. Adler was also a teacher of Hans Keller.

⁵ See Foulds's *Music To-day* (London: Ivor Nicolson & Watson, 1934), p.276, where he praises Holst's *Planets* as a work able to stand comparison 'with any contemporary composition in the whole world of music'. On Foulds in general see Malcolm MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music* (Pro/Am Press and Kahn & Averill, 1989), and the recent Lyrta CD (SRCD.212) containing his revolutionary *Mantras* (1919-30) for orchestra.

⁶ Quoted in Michael Short, *Gustav Holst: The Man and His Music* (Oxford, 1990) p.223.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.447.

sense of failure was becoming more and more acute. *Beni Mora* had only a modest success at its first performance in 1912: the orchestral suite *Phantastes*, first performed in July of the same year, was dismissed: *Hecuba's Lament* of 1912 lay unperformed as did the innovative chamber opera *Savitri* (1908-9). When the ambitious choral work *The Cloud Messenger* failed in March 1913 Holst was very distraught – understandably so, since these titles comprised all his recent major works; works which had had to be written on Sundays after a tiring week teaching at a school. In addition he had the added psychological burden of being financially beholden to a group of friends who believed in him and his compositions. Holst was the first major British composer, Elgar notably excepted, who had no private income.

Arnold Bax (in *Farewell My Youth*, p.93) refers to Holst's weighty sense of personal failure at this time. In March 1913, on a visit to Majorca with Clifford Bax, Arnold Bax and his friend Balfour Gardiner, Holst could philosophize about it: 'If nobody likes your work, you have to go on for the sake of the work. And you are in no danger of letting the public make you repeat yourself'. Every artist 'ought to pray that he may not be a success', then he can 'concentrate upon the best work of which he's capable'.⁸ However, there is no doubt that Holst was very depressed. In 1914 he told Clifford Bax that he was looking forward to '*devachan*', a Tibetan Buddhist term used by Theosophists to describe a blissful state of existence after death.

Failure motivated Holst to explore every avenue and increased his desire to understand himself. *Sita's* failure had led in 1908-9 to *Savitri's* radical innovations. In 1912 a growing feeling of failure encouraged further introspection and this time he sought the help of astrology. On the visit to Majorca in March 1913 Holst managed to have a good discussion about astrology with Clifford Bax, who was himself an astrologer and a Theosophist. The two men became good friends; but unaccountably – and in complete error – Bax wrote in 1936 that Holst lost all interest in astrology after composing *The Planets*.⁹

Holst would certainly have known of astrology

from his Theosophical upbringing. But it was not until about the period 1910-12 that he took the subject further. In fact Bax recalled that Holst told him, apropos *The Planets*: 'for two years I had the intention of composing that cycle'.¹⁰ Since Holst began work on it in 1914 that would mean he started thinking about it in 1912. In fact he owned a copy of a booklet (now in the Birthplace Museum) called *Raphael's Mundane Astrology* published in 1910. By meditating on the nature of the planets ('my planets' as he called them, in other words his chart) he began to discover new worlds of sound.

But why should Holst turn to astrology? The answer is probably that he must have been curious about his own future in the light of his apparent failures. By knowing more about himself he would know more about his future. In this he would be helped by the astrological chart, which Holst realized was a map of his own psyche. With the appropriate knowledge he would be able to investigate the 'map' himself and not rely on others' opinions; the very reasons he had studied Sanskrit and was later to study ancient Greek. The personal experience involved in this method was musically suggestive to him.

Holst may have been prompted to look at astrology more deeply by George R.S. Mead, with whom he had a little-discussed but important friendship. Mead (1863-1933) was a classical scholar of considerable distinction and a translator of Sanskrit literature. But he was also interested in Theosophy and occultism. In 1887 he became Blavatsky's secretary in London and edited the second edition of *The Secret Doctrine*. In 1890 his friend Alan Leo, the pioneering astrologer, invited him to open an occult lodge in Brixton. During the last decade of the 19th century he became well known among Theosophists on the continent, as General Secretary of the European Section of the Theosophical Society. After an argument, Mead abruptly left the Theosophists in 1908. He gave public lectures at Caxton Hall, Westminster on the Vedas, Upanishads and early Christian and Gnostic literature from this time onwards.¹¹ Mead and Holst had shared interests which may well have brought them together about this time. Mead was a member of the Royal Asiatic Society, as was Holst's Sanskrit teacher Dr Mabel Bode. Indeed in May 1909 Holst himself played at a Society meeting. Apart from Indian literature Mead was a translator of Gnostic texts: notably of the *Hymn of Jesus*, which he had

⁸ Clifford Bax *Inland Far* (London, 1925) pp.225-6.

⁹ Clifford Bax *Ideas and People* (London, 1936) p.54. Holst had a long friendship with the mathematician and well-known astrologer Vivian E. Robson. Two of Robson's book are now at the Holst Birthplace Museum in Cheltenham. One, *A Student's Text-Book of Astrology* (London, 1922) is inscribed 'with best wishes' from the author; the other, *A Beginner's Guide to Practical Astrology* (London 1931), is inscribed 'To Gustav Holst the inspirer of this book with kindest regards 23 April 1931'.

¹⁰ *Ideas and People*, pp.60-1.

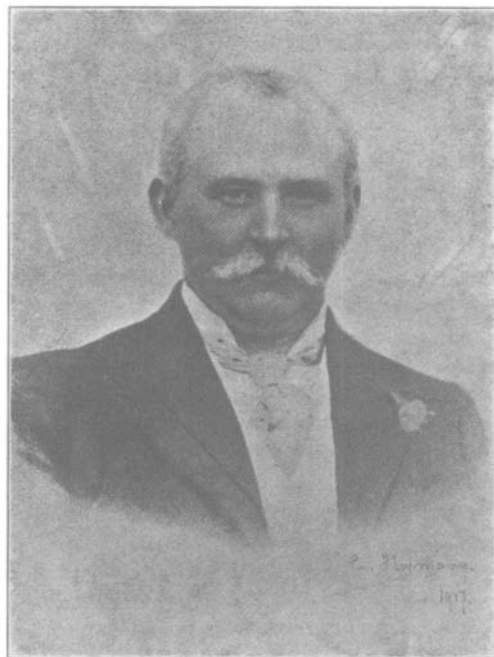
¹¹ Information from *Theosophical Year Book* (London, 1938) and *The Theosophist*, October 1933.

edited for publication by the Theosophical Society in 1907. After breaking away from the Theosophists, Mead founded a society in 1909 that would have appealed to Holst. It was called *The Quest*. The aims of the society were to promote investigation into comparative religion, philosophy and science and encourage the expression of the ideal in beautiful forms. Stylistically the aims were 'to express my belief', as Mead proposed at the inaugural address on 11 March 1909, 'that the highest use and purpose of art is to reveal and express the inner soul of things'. In other words to deal with essences: a Theosophical idea that, coincidentally, was beginning to revolutionize music and art in Vienna at the same time. No membership list exists, but the society published a quarterly journal to which some of the foremost people of the time contributed. These included the orientalist E.B. Havell (a friend of John Foulds), the Buddhist scholar Professor C.A. Rhys David (a mentor of Holst's Sanskrit teacher Dr Mabel Bode), Alfred Noyes, W.B. Yeats, Tagore, Ezra Pound, John Masefield, Laurence Binyon, Mead and Holst himself.

Both Holst and Mead shared an interest in sacred dance. Holst had mentioned the subject in a lecture given at Morley College in November 1907. In the first volume of *The Quest's* journal, Mead published the Cornish folk poem 'Tomorrow shall be my dancing day', later set in 1916 by Holst as 'This have I done for my true love'. In Volume 2 of *The Quest* (1910), Mead published an article about 'The Sacred Dance of Jesus' in which the *Hymn of Jesus* is extensively quoted. Perhaps this is why Holst makes Shiva dance in *The Cloud Messenger* (something not in Kalidasa's Sanskrit original). Mead was always searching for new areas of research which confirmed his viewpoint: thus in 1917 he warmly greeted the publication of Jung's *Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology* with its welcome repudiation of Freud's limited theories (at another critical moment Holst would take the then highly unusual step of going to a psychoanalyst).

In 1919 Holst gave a lecture to the society entitled 'The Mystic, the Artist and the Philistine'.¹² If this were not proof enough of Holst and Mead's friendship, we know that it was Mead who gave Holst the text of the *Hymn of Jesus*; and Edmund Rubbra, shortly before he died, confirmed to me the importance of Mead's friendship with Holst.

Mead also knew Alan Leo (1860-1917), the astrologer who pioneered an new understanding



Alan Leo: photograph from a reprint of *The Art of Synthesis*¹³

of the subject after centuries of neglect. Leo (who was a Theosophist, and had been a member of Blavatsky's closed circle in London) published authoritative books on various aspects of astrology, one of which, *How to Judge A Nativity*, Holst bought.¹³ In 1912, the year Holst began looking at astrology 'fairly closely', Leo published *The Art of Synthesis*, an innovative astrological book which also includes an 'Astro-Theosophical Glossary'.¹⁴ It is this book which, I think, inspired the composition of *The Planets*. Evidence for this assertion is contained within the book itself. Unlike in all his previous books, Leo devoted a chapter to each planet, elucidating their special qualities and characteristics. Each chapter was given a heading: thus 'Mars the Energiser', 'Venus the Unifier' etc. This is the very manner that Holst adopted in *The Planets*. Indeed Holst's title for the last movement, 'Neptune the Mystic', is exactly the same as Leo's chapter-heading. Further examination of the book gives valuable ideas about what Holst thought of his planets and how this is represented in the music. It also shows that in selecting his planets, and the order in which they are represented, Holst had a definite plan.

¹³ Holst's copy (now in the Birthplace Museum) is of the 1921 edition. But Holst was always lending his books to others, so it seems as if this was a replacement copy: the fact that Leo refers to Mercury as 'the Winged Messenger' suggests Holst knew the book much earlier.

¹⁴ *The Art of Synthesis* London 1912, reprinted 1978.

¹² Published by *The Quest*, 1920 and reprinted by Imogen Holst in *Gustav Holst: A Biography* (Oxford, 1969), pp.194-204.

If the planets were placed geocentrically according to the distance from the earth, the Moon should have come first, followed by Venus and Mars (Pluto was not discovered until 1930). If heliocentrically, the Sun and Mercury should come first. Instead Holst has substituted Mars for Mercury and omitted the Sun and Moon altogether. In 1926 he spoke guardedly about the *The Planets* as 'a series of mood pictures'¹⁵ but in 1927 he told Richard Capell that the suite deals with the 'seven influences of destiny and constituents of our spirit'.¹⁶ Astrologically, the pattern is clear: the order of the planets symbolizing the unfolding experience of life from youth to old age.

Leo in the *Art of Synthesis* calls Mars the 'energiser', 'the Destroying angel', 'the wrath of God', 'that which is necessary to cause motion and activity'. Begun in May 1914, *Mars* has been seen to offer a presentiment of World War I, but Holst made no such claim himself although he called Mars 'the Bringer of War'. In his cycle *Mars* would seem to describe raw Martian impulses: the chaotic energy of youth, the misuse of the will, the desire for revolutionary action. The forces for change are overwhelming. The insistent, irregular 5/4 time and the tri-tonal harmonic basis instil energy, 'motion and activity' and a great sense of impending elemental change. The huge orchestra is harnessed to this goal from the *col legno* strings and innovative 40-bar tam-tam crescendo at the beginning,¹⁷ to the summons by the horns at bar 45 to draw the 'Destroying angel' into a dance of death. Calls to action from fig.IV lead to the underground, plutonic aspects of Mars the terrorist which finally and terrifyingly erupt, uniting the orchestra at bar 110 into a kind of dominant statement of the opening idea. By the last few bars the unleashed destructive powers have shattered any conception of tonic and dominant – revolutionary change has taken place. We have all been changed. And the most abrasive, hard-edged piece of modern music had been written in Britain in 1914.

Overcome by the power and clamour of Mars Holst desired peace. Hence '*Venus the Bringer of Peace*'. Peace can only reign supreme when the warring power of Mars has spent itself (as is clearly portrayed in Botticelli's painting 'Venus

and Mars'). The opening horn solo, answered by three phlegmatic flutes, is an invocation to peace, showing that in order to achieve peace we must desire it. Leo called Venus 'the unifier' and maintained that it created 'orderly harmonious motion', 'everywhere it produces order out of dis-order, harmony out of discord whether in action, feeling or intellect'. The tri-tonal relationships of the first movement have resolved to become centred on the upward perfect fourth as in the gentle horn and violin solos, and the downward perfect fifth heard in the violins at fig.II. The whole movement is imbued with a new, restrained romantic feeling and abounds in references to previous works such as *Indra* and *The Mystic Trumpeter*. It is as if Holst were endeavouring to return to stability and former certainties. The accompanimental oscillating wind chords introduce harmonic stability and tranquillity. That Venus also brings friendship can be perceived in the middle Largo section. An expressive two-bar oboe solo with a rising arpeggio figure is subsequently played in unison by strings and woodwind, and finally as a cello solo. There is here a reference to yet another piece by Holst (the *Invocation* for cello and orchestra) but also, and more importantly, to Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (variation 12 with similar cello solo). Holst greatly admired Elgar's work, but here he may be alluding to the idea of friendship, a result of what Leo called the 'unifying' qualities of Venus. He had every reason to be grateful to his friends, and he knew it.

Mercury was the last movement to be composed, in 1916. In the *Art of Synthesis* Leo calls Mercury the 'Thinker' but in *How to Judge a Nativity* he is termed 'the Winged Messenger', the description Holst chooses for his subtitle. There follows a description that aptly describes the orchestration of the movement. 'Mercury...represents the silver thread of memory, upon which are strung the beads which represent the personalities of its earth lives'. In this movement the 'silver thread' is depicted by the use of the glockenspiel and celesta. But as Holst knew from his reading, Mercury represents the mind. With peace the mind can develop ideas, and dart hither and thither in space and time. This is why Mercury appears at this point in the suite. Musically, the movement is fleetingly characterized by its opening bi-tonal possibilities, which yield in the end at fig.II to a jaunty, attenuated version of the descending motif that ended *Venus*. The solo violin at fig.III introduces a three-bar syncopated melody that is reiterated by various instruments (like the flute solo in *Beni Mora*) for 70 bars, finally reaching a climax in the whole orchestra.

¹⁵ From *The Glasgow Herald*, 1926, quoted in Short, op.cit., p.121.

¹⁶ Programme note for a performance of *The Planets* given during the Holst festival at Cheltenham, 22 March 1927.

¹⁷ Just one of the many original examples of Holst's orchestration which cannot be discussed further here. In 1914, in his book on orchestration, Cecil Forsyth had written that one does not use the gong because it 'reminds one of dinner'.

In this manner an idea is crystalized out of the air and then swiftly spirited away.

The Stravinskian white-note bustle of the opening bars of *Jupiter* ushers in a new mood. The offbeat tune seems to explode the easy-flowing, largely conjunct note-relations of the violin melody in *Mercury*. Leo called Jupiter ‘the Uplifter’ because it signifies ‘happiness and abundance’, ‘expansion’ and brings a disposition of mirth, joyousness, hopeful and trustful, expectant and confident, and a desire for ‘devotion through service’. Jupiter also leavens the mercurial, logical mind, bringing wisdom and understanding which promote nobility of thought and aspiration. Hence, about half-way through, the high spirits are interrupted by startling brass fanfares in F sharp major which announce the more serious, noble tone of the famous *Andante maestoso* whose meaning has been obscured by its ‘I Vow to Thee my Country’ popularity. The melody is essentially an expansion of the end of the solo violin melody, with its distinctive minor third and range of a fourth, heard in *Venus* (bars 35–36). This pattern had also been used in semiquavers at the beginning of the movement and the range of a fourth forms the basis for the first half of the off-beat first tune, is taken up by horn calls at five after fig.I, violins and horns at fig.III, and the horn dance at fig.V. It forms an important characteristic of the expansive *Andante maestoso* tune. All these motifs and the answering phrase, which initially falls through a perfect fifth at Fig I, would seem to have been derived from *Venus* (see bars 3–4 as well as 35–6), and reach their fullfilment in the *Andante maestoso*. The transformation of motifs indicates that Holst was perhaps suggesting the idea that, in Jupiter, personal love gives way to a joyous service to humanity.

With *Saturn* we are again in the realm of pain. The perfect intervals that characterized the motifs in the previous three movements have been replaced, for a time, by anguished augmented fourths and diminished fifths set against grating ninths. Leo calls Saturn ‘the subduer’ and only later in another chapter of his book does he refer to Saturn by the phrase Holst adopted, ‘the bringer of old age’. Saturn governs old age: at time when everyone has to face their own mortality and the meaning of life. Saturn also brings discipline of a relentless kind when everything is tested in the crucible for truth. As Leo explains, Saturn concerns duty and ‘none can neglect duty and escape the hard fate which Saturn imposes’, for Saturn brings people ‘toward the path of Renunciation’. In this manner personal insight and wisdom are attained. All this

is most graphically illustrated in the score. From the anguished opening double-bass motif (‘make as emotional as possible’, Holst wrote in his MS score in the Bodleian Library) the ideas are carried inexorably in a ‘processional, ritualistic manner: first by trombones, then flutes, and finally trumpets, to the central *animato* section. The opening idea is subjected to powerful orchestral forces, with the clangorous tones of bells (played with metal beaters) increasing the tension unbearably. In the final section a tranquil chord of E major introduces the transformed double-bass melody. The bells are softened, and a gentle undulating woodwind accompaniment soothes the listener. By the end the strings make us aware that a new understanding has been reached. When Holst told Richard Capell that he ‘saw Saturn relent’ he must have been referring to this passage.¹⁸ Saturn, having done his work, ceases to hurt.

Saturn causes suffering ‘not as punishment for wrong-doing but as the result of the clinging to form, which binds the consciousness to matter when it should have let go all repetitions of that experience for those of a higher and finer quality’ (*Art of Synthesis*, p.140). The person who has survived this stage can then move into a new liberated atmosphere where he or she is more truly self-conscious. This is where we find Holst. In the opening brass incantation of ‘*Uranus, the Magician*’ are the musical letters of Holst’s name in German (GuStAv H.): G, Eb, A, B. (See example)¹⁹

By a most interesting and original intuition (since I can find nothing in Leo to suggest the relationship to a magician) Holst has united the extrovert aspects of the tarot card²⁰ ‘The Magician’ with the eccentricities of Uranus. Leo calls Uranus ‘the awakener’ because it shows people that there is more to living than what can just be seen or touched. A magician invokes and

¹⁸ Richard Capell ‘Gustav Holst III’, *Music and Letters*, January 1927, p.77.

¹⁹ As far as I am aware, this observation was first made by Malcolm MacDonald in a programme-note for the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1987.

²⁰ The subject of Holst’s interest in Tarot has not been explored before but the symbolic nature of the cards would have appealed to him. A.E. Waite, who published a book on the Tarot in 1910 and designed a classic pack still in widespread use, was also a member of The Quest. Holst’s opera *The Perfect Fool* has two characters who are to be found in the Tarot: The Fool and The Wizard (i.e. Magician) – but the Princess may also be derived from the Tarot as well. Is this why Marion C. Scott, who knew Holst, explained the *Uranus* movement in terms of the Tarot card ‘The Falling Tower’? See *The Listener*, 18 May 1944, p.561, and *British Music of Our Time* ed. A.L. Bacharach, (London, 1946) p.53.

The musical score is for a brass and percussion ensemble. It consists of the following parts:

- 4 Trumpets in C:** Divided into two groups, I II and III IV. They play a melodic line with various dynamics and articulations.
- 2 Tenor Trombones:** Play a supporting role with a similar melodic line.
- Bass Trombone:** Provides a lower harmonic support.
- Tenor Tuba in Bb:** Plays a melodic line that often moves in parallel motion with the brass.
- Bass Tuba:** Provides a deep harmonic foundation.
- 6 Timpani (two players):** Divided into I and II. They play a rhythmic pattern that supports the overall texture.

The score is written in 4/4 time and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (e.g., *ff*, *f*), and articulations (e.g., accents, staccato).

manipulates unseen elemental forces. A composer can also be compared to a magician, because he conjures sounds out of nothing which can alter states of consciousness in the listener. It is clear that in this movement Holst feels truly in his element, confident, enthusiastic, humorous, daring and original. Out of the resigned serenity of Saturn (2 after fig.VII) is developed the quirky bassoon motif at the beginning of Uranus; a folk-like dance tune which ends with an upreaching arpeggio figure reminiscent of the way the opening dance melody in Jupiter ends; also a dance subject in the horns which has 'a passionate energy not unlike that of Mars' (Leo) at fig.III; and yet another theme which rumbustiously explores the notes contained within a range of a perfect fourth (10 after fig.V). As Leo says: 'Uranus imparts great impulse, power and enthusiasm. . .originality of thought. . .independence.' Its action is 'sudden' and 'irregular'. This is Holst's *Uranus*, and it is hardly surprising that he admired Dukas's *L'Apprenti Sorcier*, another Uranian piece.

The lonely, remote sounds of *Neptune*, with its bi-tonality centred on oscillating chords of E minor and G sharp minor, sometimes played together, clearly indicate why Holst thought this was not a 'happy ending'. Neptune signifies the moments when the mortal self seems to fall away and one is face to face with the eternal spirit. We are on our own. It is the mystic gaze, the land of *devachan*. 'The nebulous stage which all must pass through' (Leo, p.105) '...but in good aspect to mental rulers it produces love of mysticism. . .and religious movements having an abstract or mystical basis' (Leo, p.110). It is especially noteworthy that Holst's movement, '*Neptune the Mystic*' has the same title as Leo's chapter on this

planet. This is new territory, and Holst produces striking sounds that were much commented upon at its first public performance in 1920. The consolatory clarinet solo at bar 58 introduces a completely new melodic idea, albeit derived from the minor thirds and fourths of the solo violin passage in *Venus* and in *Jupiter*. The ascent through a minor third at the beginning of the melody recalls to my mind a similar questioning, slow ascent in the *lento* section of *Uranus* (bars 227-8) and more forcibly the 'Who is He?' section from the choral vedic setting *Hymn to an Unknown God*. We are left with a mystery. It is the natural ending of the cycle that began with Mars.

So why has this aspect of a major and famous work been summarily neglected? Holst himself was very circumspect on the astrological basis. At the first incomplete, public performance in February 1919 the programme merely stated that the composer 'wishes his work to be judged as music (although) the poetical basis is concerned with the study of the planets'. It is interesting to notice he says planets, not astrology. At the first full performance in November 1920 the programme just gave an outline of themes and orchestrations.

Holst had every reason to be careful: in 1917 the most famous astrologer in Britain – Alan Leo – had been prosecuted under the infamous Vagrancy Act that could declare all astrologers, palmists, clairvoyants and mediums 'common thieves and vagabonds'. Richard Capell's notes for the 1927 Holst Festival performance of *The Planets* at Cheltenham did allude, in the introduction, to the astrological significance of the work: he reported Holst's comment that the suite 'deals with seven influences of destiny and constituents of our spirit'. But thereafter he gave picturesque

descriptions of each movement, such as calling Jupiter a kind of ‘overture for an English country festival’. These notes were later reprinted in the BBC’s *Radio Times* in 1931. In his article on Holst for *Music and Letters* (January 1927) Capell continued this vein, and added frequent references to Roman and Greek gods (for whom Holst had nothing but contempt). Whatever did Holst think of this description? We do not know. But probably he cared little, since he considered his main job to be composing. Only in recent years, with the intellectual rehabilitation of esoteric tradition in the work of (for example) Frances Yates, and the change in mental outlook generally, has it become possible seriously to discuss the astrological basis of Holst’s suite.²¹ Whether or not one accepts astrology as ‘true’, the important fact to remember is that Holst evidently did, and that his popular masterpiece resulted from his thoughts on the subject.

Together with *The Planets*’ astrological basis, there is another subject, often considered arcane, which has not been mentioned before: Holst’s use of Golden Section. Space allows me only to touch on this briefly. Suffice it to say that I completely disagree with Imogen Holst in assuming that her father’s own electrical recording of *The Planets* cannot be used as solving the problems ‘of the right basic speed for each movement’.²² Holst alone adheres to the tempo marking for *Mars* ($\text{♩} = 176$). No other more recent conductor goes so fast. But, more importantly, Holst always conducts towards the Golden Section points (according to duration) in every movement. Thus for instance the climax of *Venus* really does become – and iconoclastically

so – the *largo* cello solo, not the preceding tutti, because his andantes are never *adagio* as in so many modern recordings. In this way the twelve varied sections of the movement cohere convincingly. As also does *Saturn*. As befitting the astrological basis of the work, *Saturn* proves to be the Golden Section point and the core of the entire suite. Holst’s recording also shows that he was thinking of a work that would take the place of a Dvorák or Brahms symphony in a programme – not occupy the space of a Mahlerian work, as nearly all modern conductors make it do.

That *The Planets* was considered ‘modern’ at the time of its first incomplete public performance almost goes without saying. After the first complete performance Edwin Evans, the astute and modern-minded critic, declared Britain to be the equal of any musical nation in the world and ahead of Berlin and France in contemporary developments. Ernest Newman thought *The Planets* made the latest Stravinsky ‘seem comically infantile’. The *Daily Mail* thought the work ‘magnificent and enthralling’. For all its modernity a war-weary audience, hungering after the new, packed the Queen’s Hall and gave the composer a standing ovation. There had been nothing like it since the first performance of Elgar’s First Symphony. The reviewer in *The Queen* wrote ‘*The Planets* is one of the biggest things this century has produced. Our younger composers are now the peers of any in Europe and the inferiors of none. Holst has indeed arrived’. Through understanding his own nature (‘my planets’) Holst found he had created his first truly personal, modern work and given his audience hope for the future and a delight in the new.

²¹ Nevertheless in 1992 astrology was proscribed by the Roman Catholic Church.

²² Imogen Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst* (Third Edition, Oxford, 1986), p. 143.

Carter at 85

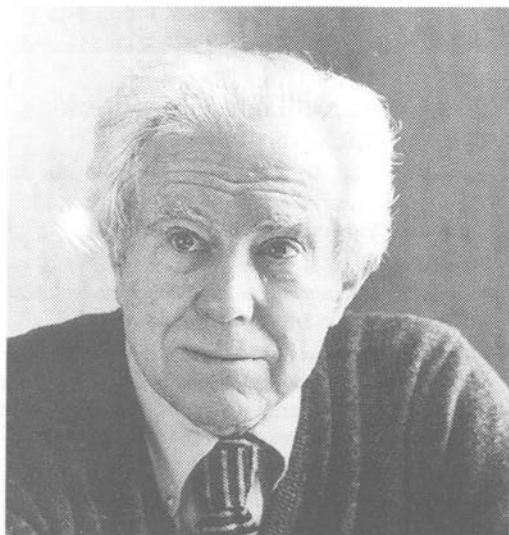


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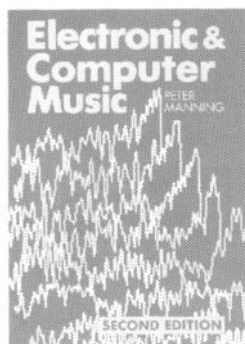
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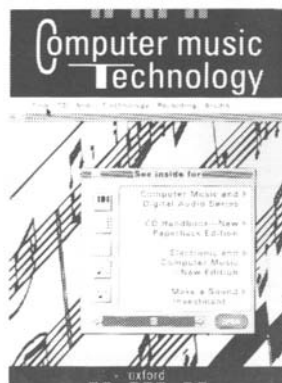
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