

37.3. I Vow to Thee, My Country (Thaxted; 1918)

Gustav Holst
(1874-1934)
arr. William Melton

Holst, Gustav

(born 21 September 1874 in Cheltenham; died 25 May 1934 in London)

Gustavus Theodore von Holst (of paternal German-Scandinavian stock) was given early instruction by his musically knowledgeable parents, and he obtained an organ post in Gloucestershire at the tender age of 17. In 1893 he moved to London and the Royal College of Music, studying trombone, history with Hubert Parry, and composition with Charles Villiers Stanford. As portrayed by his biographer Jon C. Mitchell, the young student was a passionate Wagnerian: 'Holst had already been taken in by Wagner's influence by 1892 when, after attending a Covent Garden performance of *Götterdämmerung* conducted by Gustav Mahler, he composed his own *Song of the Valkyrs*'. Further interests included British folk song and Hindu philosophy (Holst took Sanskrit lessons at University College). His progressive political beliefs — he regularly attended lectures by William Morris and George Bernard Shaw — led to the directorship of the Hammersmith Socialist Choir (and the acquaintance of his future wife, Isobel Harrison).

Holst initially supported himself as organist and trombonist, playing the latter in summer resort bands and in 1897 performing under conductors Richard Strauss and Hans Richter (the latter complimented the young man by saying that he would like to take him back to Germany). The following year Holst was engaged by the Carl Rosa Opera Company in the dual role of first trombonist and répétiteur, and 1900-04 he performed with the Scottish Orchestra in Glasgow. A regular salary allowed the long delayed marriage to Isobel to take place on 22 June 1901. Not long afterwards the couple returned south, where Holst accepted duties at St Paul's Girls School (Hammersmith) and Morley College. A daughter, Imogen, was born in 1907.

The Great War and its aftermath saw the elimination of the Teutonic 'von' from Holst's name, originally added by his grandfather for increased cachet. The composer, who had been rejected for active service on health grounds, journeyed to Greece and Turkey to bring music to British troops. At his return Holst was engaged to teach at the Royal College of Music and at Reading College. A small house in Thaxted, Essex served the family as a weekend retreat.

On 15 February 1920 the first complete public performance of Holst's masterful orchestral suite *The Planets* (composed 1914-1916) was played by Albert Coates and the London Symphony Orchestra (the New Queen's Hall Orchestra led by Adrian Boult had given a smaller private premiere in 1918). The work, inspired by astrology rather than astronomy, quickly became a concert staple in Britain and North America, where New York and Chicago held simultaneous U.S. premieres. The composer himself travelled across the Atlantic twice to conduct and give lectures (at Harvard the latter were attended by the young Elliot Carter).

Holst's productivity sagged in his last years and, plagued by ulcers, he died of heart failure at the age of 59. Close friend and colleague Ralph Vaughan Williams conducted select works at the funeral, and Holst's ashes were interred in Chichester Cathedral. As an artist, Gustav Holst made no compromises to curry popular favour. His biographer Colin Matthews described a composer who was, 'if not the most gifted of his English contemporaries, probably the most individual.'

The Planets dominates concert halls to an extent that many of Holst's other creations remain little known, particularly outside the U.K. Yet his ample catalogue of works includes eight operas, four ballets, copious amounts of incidental, orchestral, band, choral, chamber, and piano works, as well as solo songs. 'I vow to Thee, my Country' is a unison song with piano or orchestral accompaniment that probably dates from 1921. Holst was approached to provide music for a poem, 'The Two Fatherlands', penned in 1918 by Sir Cecil Spring-Rice while serving as British Ambassador to the U.S. 'At the time when he was asked to set these words to music,' remembered the composer's daughter, 'Holst was so over-worked and over-weary that

he felt relieved to discover that they *fitted* the tune from *Jupiter*'. So it was that the noble melody of the fourth movement of *The Planets* found its way into J. Curwen's sacred anthology *Songs of Praise* (1921) with the appropriate hymn name 'Thaxted' (a homage to Holst's beloved Essex refuge).

Text by William Melton