

24. A Dream of Christmas

(H139; 1917)

Gustav Holst
(1874-1934)
arr. William Melton

Holst, Gustav

(born September 21, 1874 in Cheltenham; died May 25 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 a 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 *Goötterdämmerung* 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 June 22, 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 February 15, 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 traveled 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. His 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 favor. 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 catalog of works includes eight operas, four ballets, copious amounts of incidental, orchestral, band, choral, chamber, and piano works, as well as solo songs. "A Dream of Christmas" (H139) to an anonymous text taken from Mary Segar's 'A Mediaeval Anthology' (1915), was composed in 1917 for soprano, alto and piano (or strings). Two years later saw its publication in London by J. Curwen & Sons. The first part opens in the minor mode:

The other night
I saw a sight
All in my sleep:
Mary, that may
She sang: Lullay
And sore did weep.

"Ah my dear!
Ah my dear son!"
Said Lady Mary,
"Ah my dear!
Kiss thy Mother, Jesu,
With a laughing cheer."

Midway a slightly faster tempo is called for, and the piece ends on a hopeful note in the parallel major key:

"My mother dear,
Amend your cheer,
And now be still:
Thus for to lie
It is soothly
My Father's Will."

"Ah my dear!
Ah my dear son!"
Said Lady Mary,
"Ah my dear!
Kiss thy Mother, Jesu,
With a laughing cheer."

Text by William Melton