



Lyrita

Boult *conducts* Holst

Fugal Overture
Somerset Rhapsody
Beni Mora
Hammersmith
Scherzo
Japanese Suite



London Philharmonic Orchestra · London Symphony Orchestra

Of the six works on this disc, three come from near the beginning of Gustav Holst's career and two from near its premature end. In the years which have passed since his death at the age of 59 in 1934, Holst's reputation has slowly and steadily grown. His most popular work, the huge suite *The Planets*, has always held its place as a favourite with orchestras and conductors, but the composer himself would have regarded this as an unrepresentative memorial and would have delighted in the recognition that has come to the *Fugal Overture*, the *Fugal Concerto*, the *Double Violin Concerto*, the opera *Savitri* and the choral works. His combination of sound practical musicianship, an inquiring and speculative intelligence, and the democratic approach to music and music-making he shared with his friend Vaughan Williams, give him a special place among the heroes of the 20th century flowering of English music. He also shared with Vaughan Williams the influences on his work of folk-song, the Tudor composers and the poetry of Whitman; to these were added an interest in Near Eastern philosophy which affected not only his outlook on life but his choice of musical subjects. To call him eccentric and unconventional is superficially true, but to think of him as a man out of touch with reality and unaware of the world around him is to misrepresent and misunderstand his remarkable genius. He was of both the earth and the air. As Vaughan Williams said: "Life and art are to Holst not enemies but the complements of each other".

Holst began composition of *A Fugal Overture* in the late summer of 1922 after a holiday in Derbyshire. He wrote most of it in his sound-proof room at St Paul's Girls' School. The full score was completed on 4 January 1923. Its first performance was at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on 14 May 1923 when it was pressed into service as the overture to Holst's opera *The Perfect Fool* which had its world première from the British National Opera Company conducted by Eugene Goossens. Although not intended as an operatic overture, its exhilarating mood was just right for this occasion. The first concert performance was on 11 October 1923, when Holst conducted it at Queen's Hall.

Despite its name, the overture is not strictly fugal. It belongs to the era of neo-classicism, but apparently by coincidence, for Holst had not yet heard some of the Stravinsky and Hindemith works which set this fashion. The “fugal” subject is full of spiky cross-rhythms – Holst grouped the eight quavers of his 4/4 into a pattern of 3 + 3 + 2, thus giving a bar of three unequal beats. This is played by cellos and basses, with woodwind and brass persisting with a pentatonic chord. The headlong pace slackens for a central episode, when a cello solo anticipates the bleak world of *Egdon Heath* of five years later. But the jollification soon returns. The work is piquantly scored, with a tuba solo, a duet for piccolo and bassoon and a part for sleigh bells.

The folk-song revival impinged on Holst in the first years of the century, when Cecil Sharp, Vaughan Williams and others were collecting the tunes from a rapidly contracting rural England. Holst loved the tunes and they helped to purge his compositional style of the Wagnerian chromatic harmonies which afflicted his earliest efforts, although these are not entirely banished from the delightful *A Somerset Rhapsody*, dedicated to Cecil Sharp. This was written at Sharp’s request in 1906. It was originally called *Two Selections of Folksongs* and was performed in the Pump Room, Bath, by the Pump Room orchestra, conducted by Holst, on 3 February 1906 as part of a lecture given by Sharp. The next year, Holst revised the work, omitting some tunes and dividing it into two works, *A Somerset Rhapsody* and *Songs of the West*. The latter was never published.

A Somerset Rhapsody uses tunes collected by Sharp in Somerset and was first performed on 6 April 1910 at the Queen’s Hall, London, by the New Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Edward Mason. Over a held chord in the second violins, the oboe, which Holst directed should whenever possible be an oboe d’amore (as in this recording), plays the Sheep-Shearing Song (“It’s a rosebud in June”), which is taken up by the violins. Soon a march-tune, “High Germany”, breaks the pastoral mood and the cellos introduce a third folk-song, “The Lovers’ Farewell”. The central climax comes when woodwind and brass let rip with “High Germany”, the strings rejoining them with another tune to the same words. Holst now recapitulates “The Lovers’ Farewell” and the work ends with the expected return of the Sheep-Shearing Song, combined at one point with the second version of “High Germany”.

Holst told his friend the critic Edwin Evans that he had arranged the tunes to form a kind of narrative: into a quiet country scene comes the sound of approaching soldiers. A youth who is courting a girl is persuaded to enlist and go to war. The soldiers march into the distance and the pastoral quietness returns, with the girl left alone.

In 1908 Holst went for a holiday in Algeria. The musical result, two years later, was *Beni Mora*, a three-movement suite in E minor most piquantly and colourfully scored for large orchestra. Holst first wrote (in 1909) an *Oriental Dance*, which he dedicated to Edwin Evans (his initials are incorporated into the thematic material). In 1910 he added two more movements, calling the suite *Beni Mora* from the setting of Robert Hitchens's novel *The Garden of Allah*. The first performance was in Queen's Hall on 1 May 1912, conducted by Holst. Some of the audience hissed the work and a critic wrote: "We do not ask for Biskra dancing girls in Langham Place". Vaughan Williams wrote in 1920 that "if it had been played in Paris instead of London it would have given its composer a European reputation". This was perhaps excessively loyal, but it is nevertheless delightful music, foreshadowing the exoticism of *The Planets* and the cooler "mystical" quality of later works. In fact the suite was performed in Paris in October 1922.

The first two movements are each called *Dance*, the first beginning with an expansive phrase on the strings which is interrupted by a rhythmic figure from trumpets, trombones and tambourine. Cor anglais and oboe, followed by flute, set the movement on its exotic course. The second is an *allegretto*, its mood set by the timpani's 5/4 rhythm over which a solo bassoon warbles gracefully. The scoring of this movement is especially light and delicate. The *finale* is entitled "In the Street of the Ouled Nâïls". While in Algeria Holst had listened to an Arab playing the same phrase on a bamboo flute for over two hours non-stop. This four-note figure dominates this movement, mainly on the flute, yet so skilfully is the texture varied that monotony is avoided.

Hammersmith, originally a commission for the BBC Military Band, was a

product of Holst's finest creative phase towards the end of his life. He had always loved this part of London, with its contrast between the river and the bustle of the streets and street-traders. The quiet opening of the Prelude depicts the Thames; the peace is shattered by a cheeky tune on the piccolo, answered by trombones (like a distant fog-horn), and then the piccolo tune is repeated by a coarse-toned trumpet. The *Scherzo* section begins fugally and builds up into a vivid and raucous picture of a Cockney weekend. A short and tragic lyrical episode brings relief, but this is interrupted by the sounds of well-lubricated revellers. Another slow and nocturnal section follows; the *Scherzo* is then recapitulated, but its exuberance finally gives way to the mood of the Prelude.

The wind band version was composed in 1930, but did not have a performance until many years after Holst's death. The orchestral version (1931) was first performed, conducted by Adrian Boult, on 25 November 1931 in the same programme as the first London performance of Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*.

The *Scherzo* was all that Holst completed of the Symphony he was planning in 1933–4. He completed the first sketch in August 1933. The first performance was given on 6 February 1935 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Boult, who pronounced it “fiendishly difficult to play”. Like the *Lyric Movement* for viola which immediately preceded it, it is evidence that Holst was entering a new and richer phase. The music, for all its restless vitality, flows freely and the Trio section is impassioned. Holst's daughter Imogen described movingly how her father, at a time when he was low in body and spirit, realised from a performance of Schubert's C major Quintet that it was warmth that was missing from his own work. At the very end, when it was too late, he found it.

Holst composed *The Planets* between 1914 and 1916. He had completed six of the movements, leaving only *Mercury* to be written, when he broke off in 1915 to compose the *Japanese Suite*. This was written at the request of a Japanese dancer, Michio Ito, who was appearing at the London Coliseum and wanted a work based on ancient Japanese melodies. Holst did not know any, so Ito whistled some to him.

The result was a suite of four short dances, with prelude and interlude. It cannot

be said to sound particularly Japanese; its solo-bassoon opening suggests *The Rite of Spring* and its use of glockenspiel in the Marionette dance points towards *Mercury* – where the instrument is employed with more panache – as does the experimentation with alternating metres. Whether the suite was used in the theatre is not known. Holst conducted its first concert performance on 1 September 1919 at a Promenade concert in Queen's Hall given by the New Queen's Hall Orchestra. It is an attractive work and deserves to be better known.

MICHAEL KENNEDY

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GUSTAV HOLST (1874–1934)

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|----|---|-----------------|
| 1 | A Fugal Overture Op. 40 No. 1 (1922) ** | (5'12") |
| 2 | A Somerset Rhapsody Op. 21 No. 2 (1906–7) | (9'01") |
| | Beni Mora – Oriental Suite Op. 29 No. 1 (1909–10) | (17'13") |
| 3 | First Dance | (6'28") |
| 4 | Second Dance | (3'55") |
| 5 | In the Street of the Ouled Nâils | (6'50") |
| 6 | Hammersmith – A Prelude & Scherzo
for Orchestra Op. 52 (1930–1931) | (13'40") |
| 7 | Scherzo (1933–4) | (5'29") |
| | Japanese Suite Op. 33 (1915) * | (11'04") |
| 8 | Prelude – Song of the Fisherman | (2'35") |
| 9 | Ceremonial Dance | (1'52") |
| 10 | Dance of the Marionette | (1'44") |
| 11 | Interlude – Song of the Fisherman | (0'49") |
| 12 | Dance under the Cherry Tree | (2'25") |
| 13 | Finale – Dance of the Wolves | (1'41") |
| | | (61'48") |

London Philharmonic Orchestra
*London Symphony Orchestra
Sir Adrian Boult

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SCHERZO · JAPANESE SUITE . . .

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