

*Fin-de-Siècle* Britain: Imperialism and Wagner in the Music of Gustav Holst

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Music: Musicology)  
in The University of Michigan  
2007

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Tomorrow shall be my dancing day  
I would my true love did so chance  
To see the legend of my play  
To call my true love to the dance:

Sing oh my love, oh my love, my love;  
This have I done for my true love.

— Old Cornish Poem

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank my dissertation advisor and mentor, Dr. Roland John Wiley, who took me under his guidance my first summer at Michigan, and has provided outstanding examples of learnedness, clarity and conciseness in writing, and outstanding mentorship, which I hope to emulate in my own scholarly career.

Special thanks also goes to Dr. Jenny Doctor. It was at her kitchen table after experiencing my first live performance of *Sāvītri*, at the Aldeburgh Festival, that this project was first conceived. Her unstinting support and advice since then has been invaluable.

I especially appreciate the extra time and consideration that members of my committee have spent in helping me develop as a scholar: James Borders, Glenn Watkins, Naomi Andre, Mark Clague, and Damon Salesa. A special word of thanks to Mark Clague who has been an invaluable advisor on not only my dissertation but also the other issues intertwined with its completion and my transition into the world of academia.

Several organizations and institutions have been essential to the completion of the research for this dissertation including the Rackham Graduate School and the School of Music of the University of Michigan who has provided generous funding throughout my studies to complete both the researching and writing of this dissertation. The Holst Foundation and Britten-Pears Library both in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, United Kingdom allowed me access to unpublished writings, letters, and manuscripts without which the

this dissertation could not have been written. A special note of thanks to Rosamunde Strode of the Holst Foundation, whose support, advice, and unceasing assistance has saved me much time and worry, and helped me to better understand who Imogen was. Thanks also to the entire staff of the Britten-Pears Library where I worked for several extended periods with Holst manuscript material, especially librarians Jenny Doctor and Christopher Grogan, and the head of reader services, Nick Clark. Nick was a patient and invaluable help throughout the research and writing of this dissertation.

During the year I lived in London, the British Library was my almost daily workplace, and I wish to express my profoundest thanks and respect to the long suffering staff of the Rare Books and Music Reading Room and the Music Enquiries Desk, who even on the worst of days, greeted my questions with an unflappable kindness and wit.

Many thanks to Helen Brown and Mary Greensted of the Cheltenham Historical Society and Amelia Marriette, curator of the Holst Birthplace Museum who provided helpful encouragement and access to their unmatched scrapbook collection of Holstiana, which helped shape the content of the dissertation, especially chapter 2. A number of smaller institutions provided access to their collections of material on Holst, and deserve mention here including St. Paul's Girls School, Morley College, James Allens Girls School, The Edwin Evans Collection at the Victoria Central Lending Library, and the Covent Garden Archives.

A number of scholars in the field of British music have supported both this project and my advancement as scholar. Chief among them is Byron Adams, whose advice and support has aided me greatly. It was he who suggested I take a closer look at *Beni Mora*, resulting in chapter 4 of this dissertation. Julian Rushton and Rachel Cowgill led me

through the experience of publishing my first scholarly article while I was writing my dissertation, and both have provided useful suggestions about the current project. Charles McGuire, Deborah Hoeckert, Jennifer Oates, Brooks Kuykendall, Jennifer Oates, and the organization that they devised, the North American British Music Studies Association, have been friendly and supportive of my work, and provided great encouragement. Louis Niebur and Christina Baade two great scholars and friends have provided me much practical advice on the dissertation process and my early academic career for which I am most grateful.

There are a number of peers who have read and commented on portions of this work, or which I have argued ideas with, who deserve my profoundest thanks. Chief amongst them is Eric Saylor, now a successful professor at Drake University. As a colleague, Eric and I would have long intense discussions about British music that were fundamental to the development of the views I hold today. Tim Freeze, Stephanie Heriger, Scott Southard, and Amy Kimura have all been helpful in the discussion and editing of my work, but, more importantly, they helped to contribute to an atmosphere of collegiality in the musicology department that was essential to my success. Thanks also to my other colleagues at Michigan including Colin Roust, Josh Duchan, and Jesse Johnston.

A number of businesses and organizations have contributed to the maintenance of my sanity during the dissertation process. Special thanks to everyone in the University of Michigan Gilbert and Sullivan Society, especially David Zinn, Rob Stow, Margot Rood, and Karl Zinn, and to the Friends of the University of Michigan Gilbert and Sullivan Society for their financial support during the final semester of my schooling. I would be

remiss not to mention and thank Sweetwaters café (where I am writing this now), my “office” for the last five years, and baristas Monica, Carmen, and Mike whose pleasantness have made the place even more conducive to the completion of work.

To close, words cannot express the profound sense of fortune I feel for having the supportive family that I do. From fifth grade when I announced I wanted to play the oboe, to all of the interim twists and turns which brought me to this moment, my parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family never questioned my choices, supporting me even though, at times, it meant hardship for them. I cannot wish for anything greater than I already have in my family. And although a later addition, the family of my soul mate Chilali has also been unstinting in their support for me.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Gustav Holst's unwillingness to comment on his music or his view of the world has always complicated our understanding of the composer. There are scant first-hand materials<sup>1</sup> reflecting his opinions or the events of his everyday life—the concerts he attended or the people he met.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, much of the present study is interpretation, based on the context in which Holst's music was written, and conclusions from circumstantial documentary evidence. It departs from previous Holst scholarship in that it challenges the narrative of his daughter Imogen Holst, calling her interpretations into question in the hope that a fresh reading will improve our understanding of Holst's view of the world and unique compositional voice.

Before elaborating further on the nature of this study, a brief biographical sketch of Holst may prove useful. Born in 1874 in the spa town of Cheltenham, he attended the Royal College of Music in 1893, where he studied with Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry, and met his lifelong friend, Ralph Vaughan Williams. After a stint as a professional trombonist, Holst took up teaching positions, principally at St. Paul's Girls

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<sup>1</sup> For the period covered in this study (1874-1924) around 80 letters survive, including the parts of the extensive correspondence between Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams, and some letters from Holst's trips abroad. Apart from these, most of Holst's letters are business-like or cryptic and largely unhelpful, for example, referring to inside jokes, or using astrological symbols to represent people. There are also a few drafts of lectures and talks that Holst gave, which are largely from later in life, most of which are published in Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, *Heirs and Rebels: Letters Written to Each Other and Occasional Writings on Music* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> In 1912, Holst began to keep date books, but they are also unhelpful as the entries are mostly personal reminders and random thoughts and observations which make little sense to others. See Imogen Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 128.

School and Morley College, but he also taught for short periods at James Allen's Girls School, the Passmore Edwards Settlement, The University of Reading, and the Royal College of Music. His dedication to these positions established his reputation as a teacher and advocate of amateur music making.

Before 1900 Holst became interested in Sanskrit and ancient Hindu writings, resulting in a number of works based on Eastern texts such as the *Rig Veda*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*, including his operas *Sita* (1899-1906) and *Sāvitri* (1908), the *Hymns from the Rig Veda* (1908-12), and the cantata, *The Cloud Messenger* (1909-10). His great breakthrough success came with the orchestral suite, *The Planets* (1914-6), which was given its first public performance while Holst was in Salonika, Greece, working for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) during World War I. This marks the height of Holst's popular success, and made his financial situation less precarious, but it had little effect on his approach to composition, which was continually developing. Rather than embrace his popularity and the public expectation of more works like *The Planets*, he continued on his own idiosyncratic course, expanding his musical style with works including *The First Choral Symphony* (1923-4), a *Choral Fantasia* (1930), two *Choral Ballets* (1926-7), and *Egdon Heath* (1927). These were a departure from the style that had won him wide popularity in *The Planets*. After suffering various illnesses, and from exhaustion, Holst was, by the 1930s, largely invalided. He gave up all teaching except at St. Paul's, dying unexpectedly in 1934 from complications relating to surgery on an ulcer.

Between the beginning of the twentieth-century and the end of the First World War, generally accepted as the last half of the so-called *fin-de-siècle*, Holst worked to

develop his own unique compositional voice. Our understanding of this important period is frustrated not only by the dearth of commentary from Holst but also by the single canonized narrative written by Imogen, which has frustrated attempts at updating his biography and the study of his music.<sup>3</sup> She describes her father's thoughts and actions in this period in a straightforward and declarative manner, with little outside corroboration despite the fact that she would not have witnessed much of what she depicted. She draws broad, un-nuanced connections between her father's music and his overcoming the influence of Wagner, the importance of Sanskrit literature, and the discovery of folksong. A re-evaluation of these developmental years enriches our understanding of Holst's music and his connection to wider British culture.

Imogen is the frequent target of criticism in this dissertation, so it is helpful to understand her background and the motivations that may underlie her writings on her father. She was a composer in her own right, scholarship recipient of the Royal College of Music, important figure in the folksong movement, Director of Music at the Dartington Hall Music Seminars, and, later, amanuensis to Benjamin Britten. Perhaps the most important questions in considering Imogen's background derive from her relationship to her father both when he was alive and after his death. Rosamunde Strode, one of Imogen's closest friends and successor to her as Britten's amanuensis, remarks about Imogen's relationship to her father while he was alive: "Imogen Holst had a close relationship with her father, who, while watching her progress, never interfered but gave

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<sup>3</sup> The biographies which were published after Imogen's death do add depth to our understanding of Holst, but they also often reiterate Imogen's anecdotes and judgments with little critical scrutiny. See Jon C. Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst, with Correspondence and Diary Excerpts: Including His American Years* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2001); Michael Short, *Gustav Holst: The Man and His Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). For a review which clearly shows the danger of accepting everything Imogen Holst said about her father at face value see Byron Adams, "Gustav Holst: The Man and His Music by Michael Short," *The Musical Quarterly* 76, no. 4, Winter (1992): 581-594.

excellent advice when needed.”<sup>4</sup> This view can be contrasted with that of British music scholar Byron Adams, who, while focusing on Imogen’s control over her father’s legacy, gives a more complex and equivocal characterization:

Upon his [Holst’s] death, she immediately and forcefully claimed the right to determine her father’s reputation, even though her attitude toward his achievement was at least ambivalent as it was possessive. Imogen had her own ambitions as a composer, and she must have had a bitter pill to swallow the day she finally realized that she would only be known as nothing more than the musical daughter of the man who wrote *The Planets*. In a valiant attempt to make the best of an admittedly unenviable fate, she accepted this ill-fitting mantle with an outer resignation, which evidently masked a deep resentment. When her feelings of anger and disappointment erupt in her writings about her father’s music, the stridency of her attitude approaches the tone of sibling rivalry, and this rivalry is felt in the way she conducted the very scores that inevitably occupied the first place in her father’s life.

In the odd biography of her father that she wrote in 1938, Imogen Holst portrays herself as her father’s adversary from the moment she was born. Thus the scenario is set for future conflict, with the reader in an unsettling position, never quite sure if Imogen Holst is accurately reporting her father’s documented reactions, or is only projecting her feelings about subjects she may not have understood.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps a book, written by Strode and Britten-Pears Library Librarian Christopher Grogan due for publication in late 2007 to celebrate the centenary of Imogen’s birth, will help to clarify these matters,<sup>6</sup> but Adams’s analysis suggests that Imogen’s construction of her father’s image may have been some attempt to address the effect of her famous father’s shadow on her life. Adams goes on to demonstrate the harshness with which Imogen treats her father’s music in the first edition (1951) of Imogen’s *The Music of Gustav Holst*:

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<sup>4</sup> Rosamund Strode, ‘Holst, Imogen Clare (1907–1984)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/article/31251>, accessed 20 Aug 2007]

<sup>5</sup> Adams, “Gustav Holst,” 588.

<sup>6</sup> This book will contain excerpts from the fascinating different versions of Imogen’s private diaries. Christopher Grogan, ed., *Imogen Holst: A Life in Music* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2007).

Several passages found in this volume are truly amazing. Concerning a section of the Hymn of Jesus, for example, Imogen Holst wrote, “At ‘Beholding what I suffer’ there is a conventional patch of commonplace sequences and calculated imitation, reaching its lowest abyss at ‘Had ye known how to suffer, ye would know how to suffer no more,’ where he combines the sequences with a British Empire brand of descending bass in a fat, self-satisfied three-in-a-bar, while a *più mosso* guiltily tries to cover up the poverty of the musical thought.” ... The reader is frequently startled by the vehemence of her language and the stringency of her judgment. It is interesting to note that Imogen Holst softened her tone for the second edition of *The Music of Gustav Holst* published in 1986.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this dissertation is not to criticize Imogen as a person, nor is it to dissect the complex relationship she had with her father and his legacy. Her writings, and those authors who accepted what she said, deserve scrutiny and criticism because they do not satisfactorily address the events of Holst’s life and the nature of his music. Imogen was central to the propagation of her father’s music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but her familial bond should not shield her statements from criticism. As has been demonstrated repeatedly in music history and elsewhere, when a family member becomes arbiter of a more famous relative’s posthumous reputation, he/she may eschew historical reality in order to construct an alternate, often idealized, historical narrative. For examples of this problem, consider the works of Modest Tchaikovsky on his brother Pytor, or more recently, Nike Wagner’s biography *The Wagners* itself a rejoinder to the biography of the family by her maverick cousin Gottfried Wagner.<sup>8</sup>

This study seeks to re-evaluate Holst’s life and music in connection with two topics: Imperialism and Wagner. These are important to the *fin-de-siècle* in Britain, and represent two of the most misunderstood areas of the current Holst historiography.

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<sup>7</sup> Adams, “Gustav Holst,” 589-90.

<sup>8</sup> For another example of the same problem, see Modest Tchaikovsky and Rosa Harriet Jeaffreson Newmarch, *The Life & Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky* (London: J. Lane, 1924); Gottfried Wagner, *Twilight of the Wagners: The Unveiling of a Family's Legacy* (New York: Picador, 1999); Nike Wagner, *The Wagners: The Dramas of a Musical Dynasty* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000).



Considered distinct from one another, the influence of Wagner on Holst is prone to cliché and exaggeration, while Imperialism, an essential element of British culture and society throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, is largely ignored. Reassessment will offer insight into the development of Holst's compositional voice, and will also demonstrate how culture can influence his music.

The culture of British Imperialism is vast and contradictory, and too large to deal with in its entirety in this study. For practical purposes, the influence of Imperialism on Holst's music will be presented as largely an unconscious reflection of the cultural attitudes to which the young Holst was exposed. This approach is indebted to new developments in cultural studies from the last twenty-five years, unavailable to Imogen. As we shall see, Holst was determined to emulate Wagner as a means to achieve compositional individuality, a process that did not end with his "discovery" of English folksong in 1906, as Imogen contends, but stretched all the way to 1924 and the premiere of his opera, *The Perfect Fool*.

The influence of Holst's birthplace, Cheltenham, and of the spiritual movement of Theosophy, instilled in him an interest in Eastern subjects that led to a sequence of works based on Sanskrit sources. Imperialism is constantly in the foreground as the source of his information about the East. Holst's Imperial worldview and the clash of East and West in his music will be considered, demonstrating that his interaction with the East was dynamic and multifaceted. His reverent approach to setting ancient Sanskrit texts, for example, co-existed with his Imperial view of the East in works such as *King Estmere* and *Beni Mora*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more on Holst's setting of Sanskrit texts, see Nalini Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940" (Ph.D. Diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2005), 56-73.

Holst's conscious emulation of Wagner (made clear from a letter he wrote to Vaughan Williams) was not damaging to his development, as Imogen contends, but a necessary step in the development of his individuality.<sup>10</sup> Considering contextual and circumstantial evidence, it is possible to suggest how Holst viewed Wagner and his works, and so place him within the highly influential milieu of Wagnerism in *fin-de-siècle* London. His three operas, *Sita*, *Sāvitrī*, and *The Perfect Fool* illustrate his complex negotiation of Wagnerian style and influence, an essential factor in moving from emulation to growing freedom, and finally to full artistic independence from Wagner.

Two further problems affect the study of the influence of Wagner and Imperialism on Holst: the historiography of British music of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, and the nature of Holst scholarship. The former has long been dominated by a historiographical construction known as “The Second English Musical Renaissance,” a canonical approach to British music which posits a fallow period between the age of Henry Purcell and the late Victorian era, when English musical life was dominated by foreigners (including Handel and Mendelssohn) and native composition was at a low ebb. As Robert Stradling and Meiron Hughes have shown, this mythologizing had its origins in the founding of the Royal College of Music (RCM), setting a lofty purpose for that institution: the creation of a national school of composition to rival those on the continent.<sup>11</sup> The idea of a Second English Musical Renaissance was codified by the founders of the Royal College of Music, including Sir George Grove, Sir Hubert Parry,

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<sup>10</sup> The letter in question will be discussed in detail in chapter five, and was published in Vaughan Williams and Holst, *Heirs and Rebels: Letters Written to Each Other and Occasional Writings on Music*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the role of nationalism and rivalry with Germany in the creation of the Royal College of Music see Meirion Hughes and R. A. Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840-1940: Constructing a National Music*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford,<sup>12</sup> and perpetuated by a myriad of writers across the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Elgar became the composer that led England out of the darkness of “*Das Land ohne Musik*” despite the fact he that was a product of the often-derided Victorian provincial music culture. The influence of folk music became a dominant trope when discussing the generation after Elgar, focusing on the music of Vaughan Williams, despite the fact that by 1918 Vaughan Williams had largely abandoned composition based on folk music. This version of history provided a compelling narrative, even as it wholly ignored certain composers, misrepresented others, and disregarded the influence of popular and foreign music.

Nonetheless, and largely due to the predilection of much twentieth-century British musicology not to question this confected history, the Second English Musical Renaissance was a pre-eminent historiographical concept into the 1980s. In the 1990s and 2000s, however, scholars began to re-evaluate composers such as Vaughan Williams, Elgar, and Britten in works such as the *Vaughan Williams Studies* edited by Alain Frogley and Byron Adams, *Vaughan Williams Essays* edited by Adams and Robin Wells,

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<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in their treatment of British music in their scholarly, educational, and biographical works. See C. Hubert H. Parry, *The Art of Music* (New York: D. Appleton & co., 1893); Charles Villiers Stanford, *Musical Composition; a Short Treatise for Students* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1911); Charles Villiers Stanford, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (New York: Longmans, 1914); Charles Villiers Stanford, *Studies and Memories* (London: A. Constable, 1908); Charles Villiers Stanford, *The National Song Book: A Complete Collection of the Folk-Songs, Carols, and Rounds Suggested by the Board of Education (1905)* (London: Boosey & Co., 1906); Charles Villiers Stanford and Cecil Forsyth, *A History of Music* (London: Macmillan, 1950). The Dictionary of Music and Musicians by George Grove also helped shape the ‘Second English Musical Renaissance’ version of history. See George Grove, J. A. Fuller-Maitland, and Adela Harriet Sophia Wodehouse, *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians (A.D. 1450-1880) by Eminent Writers, English and Foreign* (London: Macmillan, 1879).

<sup>13</sup> See Eric Blom, *Music in England* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1947); Henry Davey, *History of English Music*, 2nd ed. (London: Curwen, 1921); Hubert J. Foss, *The Heritage of Music; Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927); William Johnson Galloway, *Musical England* (New York: J. Lane, 1910); W. H. Hadow, *English Music* (London: Longmans Green, 1931); Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966); Sydney Northcote, *Byrd to Britten: A Survey of English Song* (New York: Roy, 1966); Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Gollancz, 1979); Henry Raynor, *Music in England* (London: R. Hale, 1980); Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985); Ernest Walker, *A History of Music in England*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

<sup>14</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar* edited by Julian Rushton and Dan Grimley,<sup>15</sup> and *Selling Britten* by Paul Kildea.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the British musical culture of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries was reassessed by George Biddlecombe,<sup>17</sup> Peter Horton,<sup>18</sup> Sophie Fuller,<sup>19</sup> Charles McGuire,<sup>20</sup> Julian Rushton,<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Temperley,<sup>22</sup> and Philip Olleson,<sup>23</sup> laying bare the falsehood that English music of that period was fallow, and reassessing the value judgments applied to British music from that time. Beginning in the 1980s there was also renewed interest in English popular music in studies by Dave Russell on the music hall and choir festivals, Trevor Herbert on brass

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<sup>14</sup> For examples relating to Vaughan Williams, see: Byron Adams, “‘No Armpits, Please, We’re British:’ Whitman and English Music, 1884-1936,” in *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland, 2000); Byron Adams and Robin Wells, *Vaughan Williams Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Alain Frogley, *Vaughan Williams Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Alain Frogley, *Vaughan Williams’s Ninth Symphony, Studies in Musical Genesis and Structure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> For more on Elgar see: Byron Adams, ed., *Elgar and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton, *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> For Britten see: Benjamin Britten and Paul Kildea, *Britten on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Mervyn Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten, Cambridge Companions to Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Paul Kildea, *Selling Britten: Music and the Marketplace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> George Biddlecombe, *English Opera from 1834 to 1864 with Particular Reference to the Works of Michael Balfe* (New York: Garland Pub, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Horton, *Samuel Sebastian Wesley: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Sophie Fuller, *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers: Britain and the United States 1629 - Present* (London: Pandora, 1994); Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff, *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction, Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Charles McGuire, *Elgar’s Oratorios: The Creation of an Epic Narrative* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Julian Rushton, *Elgar, Enigma Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Julian Rushton, ed., *Musica Britannica 1951-2001* (London: Stainer & Bell, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Temperley, *Bound for America: Three British Composers* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Nicholas Temperley, *Early Victorian Composers 1830-1860: S.S. Wesley, Macfarren, Best, and Contemporaries* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985); Nicholas Temperley, *Jonathan Gray and Church Music in York, 1740-1840, Borthwick Papers* (York: St Anthony’s Press, 1977); Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Nicholas Temperley, *The Romantic Age 1800-1914, Music in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Nicholas Temperley, ed., *The Lost Chord: Essays in Victorian Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Nicholas Temperley and Matthew Greenbaum, *The Overture in England, 1800-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984); Nicholas Temperley, Charles G. Manns, and Joseph Herl, *The Hymn Tune Index: A Census of English-Language Hymn Tunes in Printed Sources from 1535 to 1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Philip Olleson, *Samuel Wesley: The Man and His Music* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003); Samuel Wesley and Philip Olleson, *The Letters of Samuel Wesley: Professional and Social Correspondence, 1797-1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

bands,<sup>24</sup> and by Cyril Ehrlich on the economic impact of British music making.<sup>25</sup> Ehrlich influenced a group of American and British scholars who now stand at the forefront of the study of British music, and who are producing scholarship that more accurately reflects the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century British musical scene.<sup>26</sup>

Holst scholarship, unfortunately, has been little affected by these developments, and recent studies of his life and works<sup>27</sup> still rely heavily on the information presented in Imogen's studies, with their entertaining and anecdotal style, and often uncorroborated pronouncements. For example, she scorns her father's Wagnerian early style and cites the discovery of folksong, and that alone, for a sudden shift in his musical style around 1905:

He tried setting several of the folk tunes, but his piano accompaniments were not always a success, for it was difficult to grow out of the chromatic habits of the last twelve years. But folk songs finally banished the traces of Wagner from his work.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Trevor Herbert, *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Popular Music in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991); Trevor Herbert, *The British Brass Band: A Musical and Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914: A Social History*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Cyril Ehrlich, *First Philharmonic: A History of the Royal Philharmonic Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Cyril Ehrlich, *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century: A Social History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History* (London: Dent, 1976).

<sup>26</sup> See Christina Bashford, "Public Chamber-Music Concerts in London, 1825-50: Aspects of History, Repertory and Reception" (Ph.D Diss, University of London, 1996); Christina Bashford and Leanne Langley, eds., *Music and British Culture, 1785-1914: Essays in Honour of Cyril Ehrlich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jenny Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922-1936: Shaping a Nation's Tastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Simon McVeigh and Leanne Langley, *London Concert Life, 1880-1914: Transforming a Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Simon McVeigh, *The Violinist in London's Concert Life, 1750-1784: Felice Giardini and His Contemporaries* (London: Garland, 1989); Jenny Doctor and David Wright, *The Proms: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*; Short, *Gustav Holst*.

<sup>28</sup> Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 28.

Despite evidence to the contrary, her claim has been accepted without question by subsequent biographers.<sup>29</sup>

By overemphasizing the impact of folk music on Holst's style, Imogen argues for her father as a significant composer of the Second English Musical Renaissance, where he is perceived as important, but always secondary to Vaughan Williams. This places their music in constant comparison despite wildly differing compositional styles. In the 1990s and 2000s, works by Raymond Head, Richard Greene, and Nalini Gwynne began to reconsider this received image of Gustav Holst.<sup>30</sup>

With the deconstruction of the Second English Musical Renaissance by scholarly circles (though it persists in compact disc commentaries and notes of concert performances), and with the critical reassessment of Imogen's contribution, we can now consider, for the first time, how Holst's development was affected by British culture. The following chapters will re-evaluate the inherited notions that characterize our understanding of Holst from the turn of the century to the First World War. In doing so, topics which have been ignored (Imperialism) or misrepresented (the influence of Wagner) will be recontextualized. Out of this process will come a deeper understanding of Holst's development towards an individual compositional voice, and the impact of British culture on that development.

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<sup>29</sup> For an example of this see Short, *Gustav Holst*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> These works have begun to critique the image of Holst created by Imogen, and reevaluate his music outside the strictures of the established canonical narratives of British music. Head's works are probably the most skeptical of Imogen. Gwynne and Greene evaluate Imogen's pronouncements on a more case-by-case basis. See Richard Greene, *Gustav Holst and a Rhetoric of Musical Character: Language and Method in Selected Orchestral Works* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Richard Greene, *The Planets, Cambridge Music Handbooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940"; Raymond Head, "Holst - Astrology and Modernism in The Planets," *Tempo*, no. 187, December (1993); Raymond Head, "Holst and India I," *Tempo* 158, September (1986); Raymond Head, "Holst and India II," *Tempo*, no. 160, March (1987); Raymond Head, "The Hymn of Jesus: Holst and Gnosticism," *Tempo*, no. 209, July 1999 (1999); Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*; Jon C. Mitchell, *From Kneller Hall to Hammersmith: The Band Works of Gustav Holst* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1990).

The first three chapters of the dissertation concern Holst and the culture of Imperialism, and focuses on Holst's portrayal of the East in comparison to the West. The cultural influence of Imperialism is an ever-expanding field of study that embraces passionate and contested points of view. Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its sequel, *Culture and Imperialism*, are often cited as the beginning of a modern study of the cultural impact of Imperialism, and since their publications, Said's ideas have been extended and nuanced by other scholars.<sup>31</sup> In the past ten years, however, a vociferous assault has been waged by more traditional historians of empire, in books such as David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism*, which disputes the centrality of literature and the characterization of race in Said's work.<sup>32</sup> Despite these challenges, Said's argument that any colonial relationship can be understood as an unequal power relationship between colonizer and colonized, in which the attitude or mindset of supremacy inherent to the

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<sup>31</sup> See Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Julie Codell and Dianne Macleod, *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Catherine Hall, "Missionary Stories: Gender and Ethnicity in England in the 1830s and 1840s," in *White, Male, and Middle-Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Kelli Kobor, "Orientalism, the Construction of Race, and the Politics of Identity in British India, 1800-1930" (Ph.D Diss., Duke University, 1998); Ania Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, ed. John Drakakis, *The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 1998; reprint, 2002); A. L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: Or How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Another historian, Bernard Porter in his *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) questions the assumption that the population of England was well informed about the empire and interested in its governance and survival. Perhaps the most comprehensive work of traditional historians of empire is the monumental Oxford *History of the British Empire* (5 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) edited by William Roger Lewis, in which culture is ancillary to economics and politics. The *Studies in Imperialism*, edited by John Mackenzie, are essential texts that mediate between the work of Said and the traditionalists. Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*; John M. Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); John M. Mackenzie, *Popular Imperialism and the Military: 1850-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

colonizer can be considered Imperial,<sup>33</sup> forms the basis for my arguments about the intersection of Imperialism and music in this dissertation.<sup>34</sup>

Chapter two considers Holst's childhood in Cheltenham, the primary retirement destination of civil and military officials returning to England after service in India. Accounts of Holst's early years are little known, yet by examining the make-up of the town, the role of Theosophy in the Holst household, the liberality of his High Anglican parish, the Church of All Saints, and some juvenilia Holst composed for the entertainment of Cheltenham society, the role of empire in his formative years emerges as a dominant element. The chapter also considers letters written while Holst visited Algeria (1906) and Turkey (1916), which demonstrate that his Imperial view of the modern East continued beyond his Cheltenham years.

The third chapter investigates the intersection of medievalism and the East, both of which interested Holst at the turn of the century, and contributed to the Imperial import in his 1903 cantata, *King Estmere*. Important to this discussion will be the role of medievalism in British society and in Holst's life, the musical and textual evocation of the Eastern 'other' within the cantata, and how the piece might be seen to espouse an Imperial view of Britain's role in the world. The text of *King Estmere* is based on a medieval ballad popularized by Bishop Thomas Percy in his influential *Reliques of*

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<sup>33</sup> Set forth in Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 6-7; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 9-11; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> Two pieces discussed in Chapters five and six (on Wagner), namely *Sita* and *Sāvitrī*, could also be discussed here. For purposes of Imperialism, the present argument is predicated on the distinction that Holst's attitude toward the modern East is not the East represented in ancient Sanskrit texts he set. Nalini Gwynne's work in this area considers the role of India in the British musical imagination, investigating the Imperial attitudes of Britain towards one of its most important colonies, but also the influence that India had upon British musical culture. Gwynne is the first scholar to posit that Holst had contact with Indian Classical music and that this is reflected by characteristics found in his Sanskrit works, and, ultimately in *The Planets*. See Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940". Her dissertation is currently in press.



*Ancient English Poetry*, which Holst carefully altered to his own dramatic purpose.

Coming early in Holst's compositional life, the East is dealt with stereotypically, but he succeeds in distinguishing East from West clearly. The broad message of the piece, which glorifies England, in the person of King Estmere, as superior to the East represented by the darker skinned Muslim, Sir Bremor, will demonstrate a connection between medievalism and British Imperial policies.

The fourth chapter considers the genesis of and influences behind Holst's most eloquent and complicated commentary on the modern East, his orchestral suite, *Beni Mora*. In 1906, after the failure of his music drama, *Sita*, he took a four-week vacation to Algeria, which has received little scrutiny by his biographers. They characterize the trip as a bicycling holiday in the desert to help ameliorate his neuritis and wounded pride. This chapter will compare the musical and rhetorical content of *Beni Mora* to the letters and sketchbooks that Holst wrote while in Algeria, as well as passages from Robert Hichens' novel *The Garden of Allah*, from which Holst derived the title of the suite. Through these considerations, a more complicated reading of *Beni Mora* emerges, which questions the accepted account of Holst's trip while demonstrating that his view of the modern East was essentially Imperial.

The influence of Richard Wagner's music over Holst can be traced from 1899 to 1924. Chapter five will consider how the music drama, *Sita*, emulates Wagner, and how the work could reflect *fin-de-siècle* beliefs about Wagner propagated by the vibrant culture of English Wagnerism in London. Through this process, *Sita* will be reinterpreted from an embarrassing failure into a key part of Holst's compositional development, in

which his imitation of Wagner aided and directed his growing sense of compositional identity while espousing his personal belief in socialism.

If *Sita* represents Holst emulating Wagner, then his next dramatic work, *Sāvitrī*, the subject of chapter six, represents the subsuming of Wagnerian elements into his own compositional style. Many of the outer trappings of Wagnerian influence—immensity in scope and forces, and extreme chromaticism—are indeed absent in *Sāvitrī*. In the music, Holst uses Wagnerian chromaticism as one option for moments of high drama, rather than a prevailing musical style, as in *Sita*. Subtly merged in music and libretto are the affinities between the Hindu beliefs held by Holst and expressed in *Sāvitrī*, and Wagner's appropriation of the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Investigating the Wagnerian subtext of *Sāvitrī* does not question Imogen's rightful placement of the work as one of Holst's first individual masterpieces, but like the music of Debussy, Strauss, Massenet, Rimsky-Korsakov and other important composers of the decades following Wagner's death, *Sāvitrī* represents Holst's assimilation of Wagnerian tradition into a personal style.

Chapter seven concerns the composition of Holst's next opera, *The Perfect Fool*, which was conceived immediately after the failure of *Sita* but not completed and performed until 1923. This opera contains a character who personifies Wagnerian music, and this demonstrates Holst's ability to mock that which he once revered. In the intervening years, between 1906 and 1924, he was involved in several theatrical projects, all of which had their impact on the final version of *The Perfect Fool*. Once these influences are understood (from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* to a slapstick burlesque of operatic conventions rehearsed in air raid shelters during World War I), the premiere of *The Perfect Fool*, as the first opera in the first season made up predominantly of

British opera at Covent Garden, becomes important. The popular perception was that *The Perfect Fool* was invested with allegorical meaning, obscuring Holst's blending of grand opera and popular indigenous genres, namely ballad opera, operatic burlesque, pantomime, and variety, to create what is ostensibly a unique English operatic genre, which continues the long tradition of English satirical comedy while critiquing English taste for continental composers. Consideration of *The Perfect Fool* not only rounds out the discussion of Wagner, it demonstrates the individuality of the mature Holst, and the difficulties that arise when public expectations are placed on a composer with little regard for public opinion.

In examining Holst's relationship to Wagner's music, we better understand the ongoing process through which Holst integrated Wagnerian elements into his own style, as well as the outside influences, such as philosophy and popular culture, which shaped this process. In this way, Wagner becomes a positive force which, to quote Holst, "leads one to fresh things," rather than a daunting obstacle to be overcome before one can advance. The conclusion summarizes points covered in previous chapters, while briefly examining Holst's participation in the First World War, an experience that would change his aesthetic outlook, and bring the period discussed in the dissertation to a close.

## Chapter II

### The Two Cheltenham: Imperialism and Theosophy in Holst's Formative Years

The Britain into which Gustav Holst was born and lived was awash with the culture of empire, thanks to almost 300 years of Imperial endeavors. The social, cultural, and economic space of empire is vast and contradictory, and therefore too large to be considered in its entirety in this study.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I will examine ways in which understanding the British empire through the words “Imperialism” and its corollary, “colonialism,” influenced Holst’s personal ideology and the content of his compositions.

The definitions of words like “Imperialism” and “colonialism” are much contested. Ania Loomba provides a starting point:

[Imperialism is] the phenomenon that originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control. Its result, or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of Imperial domination, is colonialism or neo-colonialism. Thus the Imperial country is the “metropole” from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls. Imperialism can

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a list of recent studies that look at different aspects connected with Imperialism: Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*; Antoinette Burton, *Politics and Empire in Victorian Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Codell and Macleod, *Orientalism Transposed*; Annie E. Coombes, “For God and for England: Missionary Contributions to the Image of Africa,” in *Reinventing Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Eagleton, Jameson, and Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*; Colin Graham, *Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire, and Victorian Epic Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); J. H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain, 1900-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Hall, “Missionary Stories: Gender and Ethnicity in England in the 1830s and 1840s.”; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999); Kobor, “Orientalism, the Construction of Race, and the Politics of Identity in British India, 1800-1930”; A. L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London: Longman, 2002); Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader*; Mackenzie, *Popular Imperialism and the Military*; John M. Mackenzie, “The Popular Culture of Empire in Britain,” in *Oxford History of the British Empire: The 20th Century*, ed. Judith Brown and William Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Christine Peltre, *Orientalism in Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998); Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*.

function without formal colonies (as in United States Imperialism today) but colonialism cannot.<sup>2</sup>

This definition, with its emphasis on power relationships, is indebted to the work of the literary critic Edward Said. In his groundbreaking study, *Orientalism*, he claims:

Since the middle of the eighteenth century there had been two principal elements in the relation between East and West. One was a growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Orient, knowledge reinforced by the colonial encounter as well as by the widespread interest in the alien and unusual, exploited by the developing sciences of ethnology, comparative anatomy, philology, and history; furthermore, to this systematic knowledge was added a sizable body of literature produced by novelists, poets, translators, and gifted travellers. The other feature of Oriental-European relations was that Europe was always in a position of strength, not to say domination. There is no way to put this euphemistically. True, the relationship of strong to weak could be disguised or mitigated... but the essential relationship, on political, cultural, and even religious grounds, was seen— in the West, which is what concerns us here— to be one between a strong and a weak partner.<sup>3</sup>

For Said, the East and West exist in binary opposition to each other, allowing Europeans to define and categorize those they encounter in the empire, and also to define themselves as different from “others.”<sup>4</sup> The process of otherness is accomplished, as Loomba points out, by bringing

together a range of creative writers, statesmen, political thinkers, philologists, and philosophers who contributed to Orientalism as an institution which then provided the lens through which the “Orient” could be viewed, and controlled; but equally this control itself spawned these ways of knowing, studying, believing, and writing. Thus knowledge about and power over colonized lands are related enterprises.... Said’s project is to show how “knowledge” about non-Europeans was part of the process of maintaining power over them; thus the status of “knowledge” is demystified, and the lines between the ideological and the objective blurred.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Loomba offers a useful consideration of the etymology of these words that lends depth and strength to her definitions. Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 39-40.

<sup>4</sup> The construction of the “other” is a well-established discourse in colonial studies and can be traced from the writings of Michel Foucault through Edward Said’s work. Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Texts (fiction and nonfiction) helped to highlight the difference between inhabitants of East and West, and shape public consciousness of the East. What is the effect of this orientalizing process on what Said calls “the Western consumer of Orientalism”?<sup>6</sup> For music, Loomba’s and Said’s ideas open new ways of interpreting how a British composer interacted with the East. With Holst, this complicated process began in his youth.

Born in Cheltenham in 1874, Holst grew up in a primary retirement destination for civil and military officials from the empire. Given his subsequent interest in the East it is instructive to examine Cheltenham’s culture and society, as these were most likely the source of Holst’s Imperial values. Cheltenham came to prominence as a spa when George III visited to take the waters. Though he was there but a short time, (five weeks in 1788) it was enough to trigger a boom for the town as aristocratic families visited in an attempt to follow royal fashion. By the mid-nineteenth-century, the town’s history focused on three characteristics— Imperial, religious, and educational— which were all connected and gave rise to two different mindsets. One was the traditional conservative Imperial view, supported by pensioners of the empire, the Evangelical churches they attended, and the boys colleges they founded to train their sons to follow in their footsteps. The second was a newer, freer thinking view brought about, in part, through the liberalization of religious doctrine and the advancement of women’s education.

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<sup>6</sup> Said clarifies what he means by Orientalism: “Philosophically, then, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism; anyone employing Orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality. Rhetorically speaking, Orientalism is absolutely anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts. Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from ordinary historical knowledge. These are a few of the results, I think, of imaginative geography and of the dramatic boundaries it draws.” Said, *Orientalism*, 72-3.

The town's connection with empire began after the Napoleonic Wars when many senior military officers retired to Cheltenham, and its popularity grew as the empire expanded in the nineteenth-century. The importance of empire to Cheltenham is summed up admirably in the following description:

Any account of the town's residents must take into consideration the large numbers of retired or semi-retired military and East India Company personnel who settled in Cheltenham from as early as the 1820s, and who helped to establish its reputation as a favoured residential town. By the second half of the century, they were so numerous that, according to W. E. Adams, the town "acquired the sobriquet of Asia Minor... you couldn't fire a shot-gun in any direction without hitting a colonel." Many of them had served in India and other parts of the Empire, and they were attracted to Cheltenham by its sheltered position and mild climate, by the beneficial effects of its waters on livers and digestions that had been disordered by life overseas, and by the congenial atmosphere of the town, with its spas, its tree-lined rides, and, particularly during the middle decades of the century, its churches, schools and exclusive clubs. Some observers even went so far as to suggest that the town resembled those in India; in 1838, for instance, Miss Catherine Sinclair visited Cheltenham and noted in her journal that "this is indeed a brilliant city, in many places so much resembling Daniel's *Views of Madras* that, the day being hot, I began to fancy myself there, and very nearly ordered a currie for dinner. The wide open verandahs and porches want nothing but a pagoda tree to be occasionally shaken, and a nabob might forget he had returned home."

Cheltenham's Anglo-Indian connection was an important part of its social composition for many decades, and it gave the town the distinctive 'curry and colonels' image with which it lived out the second half of the nineteenth-century. Even in the years of the present [twentieth] century it was referred to as the 'Anglo-Indian Paradise,' and only with the decline of Empire and the development of new roles for the town during the past half-century has it [the Anglo-Indian connection] ceased to be a major element in the town's life.<sup>7</sup>

Cheltenham's Imperial ambience was validated and supported by the vigorous evangelical revival that gripped the town in the early and mid-nineteenth-century. Led by Reverend Francis Close, it virtually dictated the conservative styles and mores of

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Blake and Roger Beacham, *The Book of Cheltenham* (Buckingham, England: Barracuda Books Limited, 1982), 62.

Cheltenham society.<sup>8</sup> The town's evangelical leaders welcomed and sanctioned the veterans, as Gwen Hart comments:

There can indeed be no doubt that military and naval circles in Cheltenham rendered great service in the expansion and defence of the Empire, and that they did this with the blessing and goodwill of the Evangelical clergy of the town, to whose congregations they mainly belonged.<sup>9</sup>

The fruit of these connections was the Cheltenham Boys College, where sons of retired civil and military men could receive an education that was morally informed with Evangelical principles— and would prepare them for a military or civil career in the empire.<sup>10</sup> The school's very foundation is a testament to its strong Imperialist credentials:

From its earliest days as a spa the town had attracted men who had served abroad.... Not all the newcomers were wealthy. Many of them had retired on Army or Navy pensions and felt the need of a good but not too expensive day-school for their sons. Cheltenham College was founded in 1841 by the efforts of a few of these residents— among whom were George Harcourt, Major-General Swiney, Captain Iredell of the Bombay Native Infantry, and Captain Richard Litchfield (Royal Artillery)... It was the first new English public school to be founded in the nineteenth-century and was the model for many successors.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Among Reverend Close's achievements was the foundation of teacher training schools, St. Paul's for men and St. Mary's for women, along Evangelical lines. See Charles More, *'a Splendid College: an Illustrated History of Teacher Training in Cheltenham 1847-1990* (Cheltenham: Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, 1992); Charles More, *The Training of Teachers, 1847-1947: A History of the Church Colleges in Cheltenham* (Cheltenham: Hambledon Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Gwen Hart, *A History of Cheltenham*, 2nd ed. (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1981), 210. The Evangelical movement itself had a strong commitment to India through the work of its missions, which attempted to convert Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists to Christianity, but with little success. For more information on the moral crusade of the British empire see: Burton, *Politics and Empire in Victorian Britain*; Coombes, "For God and for England: Missionary Contributions to the Image of Africa."; Hall, "Missionary Stories: Gender and Ethnicity in England in the 1830s and 1840s."; Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*.

<sup>10</sup> "It was mainly the failings of the Grammar School that provided the impetus for the establishment of the Cheltenham College in 1841, at which the sons of gentlemen could receive an education 'conducted strictly in conformity with the principles of the Church of England,' and one which would particularly equip them either for the Universities or for a career in the Army or Civil Service." Beacham, *The Book of Cheltenham*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Hart, *A History of Cheltenham*, 199.



Imperial retirees, the churches they attended, and the schools they founded surely encouraged an Imperial perception of the empire,<sup>12</sup> and there were a number of opportunities for Holst to encounter this Imperial Cheltenham. His father, Adolph, was a popular music teacher in the town, and music director of the town's Montpellier Rotunda, an important social space for the middle and upper class. His son's first attempts at composition were heard there and at the Church of All Saints where his father was organist.<sup>13</sup> A more direct connection to the Imperial contingent of Cheltenham society was the composition of Holst's first opera, *Lansdown Castle*, to a libretto by Colonel A. C. Cunningham. The opera was first produced at the Cheltenham Corn Exchange in 1893 to positive reviews in the local press.<sup>14</sup> The work provides direct evidence of Holst's exposure to Imperial attitudes of Western superiority. A reviewer wrote of the opera:

Lord Raymond and his knights find life at Lansdown Castle very slow, notwithstanding the attractions of bazaars and drawing-rooms, the proceeds of which are devoted to send collars to the poor benighted subjects of Oko Jumbo, and to the poor ignorant subjects of Jah-Jah, West Indian potentates—“lucky chaps,” as Lord Raymond describes them, who “chop off their wives' heads when they're tired of 'em.”<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with Said's view of colonial rule, many British people saw themselves as superior to those under British control in the empire, despite never meeting a “native” in person. Holst's first trip outside of Europe was to Northern Africa in 1908, long after he had left Cheltenham for London. A series of letters chronicles this first contact with

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<sup>12</sup> John Mackenzie recognizes Cheltenham as a location of intense Imperial sentiment in his larger consideration of Imperial popular culture. See Mackenzie, “The Popular Culture of Empire in Britain,” 212.

<sup>13</sup> See Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1-10; Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*; Short, *Gustav Holst*, 14-19.

<sup>14</sup> As Alan Gibbs relates: “The ‘castle’ was a castellated Victorian House in Cheltenham, since demolished, around which the gallant major wove a fantastic plot with such characters as Sir Rigmarole and Hocus Pocus the sorcerer... We have to admit with Fritz Hart, one of Gustav's RCM friends, that ‘doubtless *Lansdown Castle* is a very crude work and owed much to two of his earlier loves— Sullivan and Grieg.’ It is surprising that he submitted it for an RCM scholarship examination.” Alan Gibbs, *Holst among Friends* (London: Thames Publishing, 2000), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., “Lansdown Castle,” *Gloucester Chronicle*, February 11 1893.

the real East.<sup>16</sup> He seemed quite impressed with many aspects of life in Algiers, observing a sense of the mingling of East and West within the city:

Algiers I did one grandly idiotic thing. I carried my bag myself through a crowd of 500 Arab porters through the docks up the steps to the tram. When I left the latter the fun began again. I know now the true meaning of “street Arab” but our English imitation is mild and amateurish. I conceived the deadliest hatred against all Arabs and even now it is only just diminishing... and the busy city is really great fun now that I have had a night’s rest. Beyond Mustapha (aristocratic suburb) the country seems lovely and the village Arab delightful but I shall know more when I have cycled out some distance... But Algiers is a weird mixture of East and West. This morning an Arab boy aged 6 called out after me “sirree, siree, Ich speech anglais!” Today I saw heaps of Arab women coming from mosque. Then I caught sight of an advertisement of an American Cinematograph which gave “Grand Representations de la Passion de Notre Saveur [sic] Jesus Christ” with a footnote that you could get in for half price with coupons of somebody’s chocolate! There is no Eastern smell in the streets but the noise is terrific.<sup>17</sup>

Implicit in this quotation is Holst’s realization that his previous perception of the East differs greatly from his experience. Most importantly, we sense the dichotomy in Holst’s mind between familiar (West) and “other” (East) and his surprise at their juxtaposition. His descriptions of interactions with Arabs reveal a tone of superiority that softens somewhat in a later letter, as the shock of his arrival subsides, but the sense of superiority is still present especially in his portrayal of the “real Arab:”

All Arabs are not like those of the docks! I am quite at home here now and have visited a mosque, 3 churches, a synagogue, and a Kasbah and a few other things of the sort. But the chief glory of Algiers is the native quarter. The streets are really flights of steps with dirty shops or houses on either side *and* the “Smell of the East!”... The native dresses are so varied— so are the natives themselves. The real Arab is a blooming aristocrat who hardly deigns to notice you. However he usually spits after you have passed! He is comparatively clean and sometimes handsome— always dignified.... But there are those who are wild dirty looking blackguards with faces of fiends. And French ladies go up and down the native quarter with their children in perfect safety!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> His earlier encounters were through the reminiscences of those he encountered in Cheltenham, in books he read, and other second hand accounts.

<sup>17</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Algiers, 17 April 1908, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

<sup>18</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Algiers, 20 April 1908, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

Holst's depiction is steeped in value judgments based on Victorian English moral and social codes. The sense of British superiority and the expectation of "otherness" are elements of Holst's approach to the East that could have come from his years in Cheltenham, amongst those whose professional lives were dedicated to the continuing supremacy of the British Empire throughout the world.<sup>19</sup>

Ten years later Holst traveled East again, this time to what is now Salonika, Greece, under the aegis of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), at the end of World War I. While traveling there he passed through Gallipoli, noting in distinctly racial terms: "The natives must have a certain amount of Arab or Turkish blood in them. They have nothing in common with Northern Italians that I can see and are just on the border of civilization and often over it."<sup>20</sup> Here the implication of race is clear with the darker skinned southern Italians nearly barbarous, and, therefore, in Holst's mind, connected to the Arabs and the Turks. Later, Holst writes from Constantinople:

So far as I can see the Turks are just good fighters and nothing more. They got their religion, their script, their art from the Arabs. The only purely Turkish invention I know is the fez which is a silly affair when one has seen a turban. The difference between the Arab and the Turk reminds me of the difference between the Greek and the Roman, only the Roman could do other things besides kill, while I'm doubtful if the Turk could.<sup>21</sup>

Here is Holst after longer-term contact with the Turks, whom he finds inferior to the Arabs he had met in Algeria fifteen years earlier. The defining characteristic that sets the Turk apart is violence, which seems to be the native's sole talent and pursuit.

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<sup>19</sup> Holst views those that he encounters in stereotypical groups, street Arab, village Arab, real Arab. It is almost as if he were describing a classification rather than another human being. The organization of indigenous peoples into discrete groups was a characteristic of the British administration of empire and was perhaps another element of Imperial worldview that came from his Cheltenham experiences. For a fascinating exploration of this British penchant in India see Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

<sup>20</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Gallipoli, 11-12 Nov. 1918, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

<sup>21</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Constantinople, 26 March 1919, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

Holst's tone may have been influenced in part by the fact that the Ottoman Empire had fought against England in World War I, but in a subsequent letter he clearly articulates supreme confidence in British values and judgment and contempt for Turkish behavior:

Stamboul is mostly built of wood. And the wooden houses are mostly quite beautiful – quite the most beautiful things the Turks make for apart from them their architecture seems to run to barracks. Also they usually catch fire (the houses not the Turks) and then there is a lovely blaze and— apparently— everyone looks on and waits for the British to put it out. Which we always do.<sup>22</sup>

Holst's belief in the superiority of the West and inferiority of the East is clearly demonstrated indicated in these letters, and these brief excerpts give insight into his views of the East, and his understanding of Eastern peoples as an "other." The East was a place full of exotic sounds, smells, and crowds that provided a basis of difference from which to identify its "otherness." Nevertheless, his reading, writing, and artistic output reveal a basic fascination with cultures and philosophies that were different from his own.

Alongside the Imperial influences of Cheltenham, Holst was exposed to liberal strains of thought through his father's church and his stepmother's interest in Theosophy, both of which were reactions against Evangelicalism that heralded the gradual diversification of religious views in Cheltenham during the last two decades of the nineteenth-century. The Evangelical churches and the colonial members of their congregations were central to the foundation of the Cheltenham Ladies College (CLC),<sup>23</sup> one of the first schools of its kind. Its original mission was to provide the education expected of a young lady in the middle or upper classes, including basic instruction in languages, the classics, art, music, and rudimentary mathematics. Such an institution,

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<sup>22</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Constantinople, 18 April 1919.

<sup>23</sup> Reverend Francis Close was its first president.

though, greatly expanded opportunities for women in education, leading, in the last decades of the nineteenth-century, to the establishment of female colleges at Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, though founded by Evangelicals, the Cheltenham Ladies College helped to liberate women from the subservient domestic roles favored by Evangelicalism, and hastened the establishment of sexual equality in England. The Cheltenham Ladies College had direct connections to the Holst family as both Holst's grandfather and father were music teachers there.

The Evangelical movement provided many women with their first experience with political power through missionary groups, temperance societies, and other socially responsible endeavors. The liberalizing accomplishments of the Cheltenham Ladies College are but one indication of how the town became more accepting of non-Evangelical points of view.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the century, during most of Holst's adolescence, high and low Anglicanism, Nonconformist, Methodist, Baptist, and even Roman Catholic churches coexisted without tension,<sup>26</sup> contributing to a plurality of religious views.

One of the fruits of this new religious tolerance was the newly founded Church of All Saints, which one historian describes as "an Oxford Movement church<sup>27</sup> by John Middleton consecrated in 1868 and full of colour with its heraldry, musical angels, and

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<sup>24</sup> Hart, *A History of Cheltenham*, 201. See also Gillian Avery, *Cheltenham Ladies: A History of the Cheltenham Ladies' College* (London: James and James Limited, 2003); More, 'a Splendid College: an Illustrated History of Teacher Training in Cheltenham 1847-1990'; Tim Pearce, *Then and Now: An Anniversary Celebration of Cheltenham College* (Cheltenham: The Cheltonion Society, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Hart, *A History of Cheltenham*, 216-219, 314-323.

<sup>26</sup> The sense of pride in the variety of the church offerings can be found in a turn of the twentieth-century tour guide. See J. H. Garrett, *Cheltenham: The Garden Town*, sixth ed., vol. 7, *Burrow's Royal Series of Official Albums* (Cheltenham: Edward J. Burrow, 1910).

<sup>27</sup> The Oxford Movement sought to reconnect Anglicanism to the rituals and mysticism of its Roman Catholic past, contrasting with the austere and unadorned traditions of Low Church Evangelicalism.

gilded statues.”<sup>28</sup> Its lavish decorations and connections to the high church Oxford Movement put it at the opposite end of the Anglican spectrum from the older more austere Evangelical churches in Cheltenham. The *Magazine of the Church of All Saints* suggests the parish was an environment open to differing points of view, with positive articles on the writings of Cardinal Newman.<sup>29</sup>

Holst’s father worked as organist and sometime conductor at the church, and it is evident from the reviews of concerts and his organ playing in liturgies that he was valued and loved within the church community.<sup>30</sup> This church is important to Holst’s early development because it allowed him his first chance to perform (as substitute for his father on the organ) and to try out early pieces, and it also introduced him to a form of Christianity that valued differing opinions and inclusion. The advances of the Cheltenham Ladies College and the establishment of the Church of All Saints point to a

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<sup>28</sup> Gibbs, *Holst among Friends*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> G. G., “Cardinal Newman I,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* 5, no. 9, September (1890); G. G., “Cardinal Newman II,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* 5, no. 10, October (1890). Cardinal Newman went to Oxford to study religion in the 1850s and was influential in the Oxford Movement. He eventually converted to Roman Catholicism and became a Cardinal, overseeing the early years of the Roman Catholic Church’s reestablishment in England. For his high church beliefs, and later conversion, he was reviled by the evangelicals.

The liberalism of the Church of All Saints is also demonstrated by the following quotation from the parish magazine, which criticizes the exclusionary nature of Evangelical Protestantism: “It had previously been suggested lately that it was not honest or loyal on the part of ministers of the Church of England to claim the title of the name of Catholic and to refuse to accept the title of Protestant when the head of their Church— by which title was intended the Queen, though the title did not belong to her— ‘swore at her coronation that she would do all she could to maintain the Protestant reformed religion established by law.’ She was not responsible for the language adopted in the coronation oath, the meaning of which, however, was abundantly manifest; but while it was impossible for an English Churchman, whether minister or otherwise, to refuse the title of Protestant, he might also claim the title of Catholic, and might rejoice in that title as a higher and better one than the other. Bishop of Carlisle, “Are You a Protestant?,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* [Vol.] 6, no. 7, July (1891).

<sup>30</sup> This comment from the parish magazine about a performance of Spohr’s *The Last Judgment* is typical: “Mr. von Holst, who with the exceptions before mentioned, presided at the organ throughout, deserves the greatest praise not only for the arduous and excellent work he performed during the afternoon, but for the labor of preparation in which he necessarily took a leading part. W. G. Baker, “Recital of Sacred Music,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* 6, no. 12, December (1891). See also W. G. Baker, “Church Music,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* 5, no. 3, March (1890); C. H. King, “Hymn of Praise,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* 5, no. 6, 1890; C. H. King, “Organ Recital,” *The All Saints Parish Magazine* 5, no. 10, October (1890).

new openness of thought that may be seen as a counterpoint to the traditional Evangelical churches and their Imperialist views already discussed.<sup>31</sup> The retired colonels and civil servants did not disappear,<sup>32</sup> but other views of the East began to emerge, contributing to the complexity of late nineteenth-century Cheltenham.

Another indicator of freer thinking in Cheltenham was the appearance of Theosophy. Discussion of Theosophy will be limited here to the Theosophical Society, founded in 1879, which adopted as its motto: “There is no religion higher than truth.” As Antoine Faivre notes:

According to the wishes of its founders (H. P. Blavatsky, 1831-1891; H. S. Olcott, 1832-1907; and W. Q. Judge, 1851-1896), [Theosophy] responded to a triple goal: (a) to form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood; (b) to encourage the study of all religions, of philosophy, and of science; and (c) to study the laws of Nature as well as the various psychic abilities of human beings.<sup>33</sup>

The founders viewed the Theosophical Society as a meeting ground for people of all faiths and denominations, and placed heavy emphasis on Eastern religions.<sup>34</sup> The Society sought universal truths common to world religions, which were uncorrupted by individual

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<sup>31</sup> Empire and Imperial matters feature rarely in the content of *The All Saints Parish Magazine*. This may indicate that members of the church were not of the upperclasses to which retired military and civil servants belonged, but rather drawn predominantly from the lower-middle and working classes. The Church’s location in the near north of Cheltenham, (as opposed to the south, where the fashionable squares and mansions stood) in a neighborhood of modest masonettes reinforces this hypothesis.

<sup>32</sup> The empire connection was still a dominant factor in Cheltenham society into the twentieth-century, as a tourism publication from 1910 points out: “Inhabiting the numerous villas and residences in terrace and square is a large population of the leisured class. A considerable number of heads of families bear military titles, and allied to these are others who have at some time served the country in a civil capacity, and who have experiences of India and other parts of the Empire, similar to those of their friends the retired army officers.... From these sources are chiefly drawn the members of that smart society which is of leading merit in the matter of fashionable attire and vivacity of manners.” Garrett, *Cheltenham: The Garden Town*, 70.

<sup>33</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>34</sup> Blavatsky and Olcott converted to Buddhism, and eventually moved the headquarters of the Society to Adyar, India.

religious sects or doctrines,<sup>35</sup> and claimed to offer Hindus a purer form of their doctrines, unsullied by high caste Brahmins (holy men) who had corrupted the faith through the caste system.<sup>36</sup> For Judeo-Christians it sought to reduce the role of a personal god while emphasizing early forms of Christianity, especially Gnosticism. A sizeable part of this quest was the translation and study of ancient Sanskrit texts. *The Theosophist*, the society's official journal, contains articles on topics such as reincarnation, the *Rig Veda* scriptures, and karma, as well as Western-oriented topics, such as occult science and Gnosticism. Many Eastern texts and ideas that would later fascinate Holst can be found in the pages of this journal, to which his stepmother, as an organizer of the Theosophical Centre in Cheltenham, surely must have subscribed.

Theosophy's approach to the East shares common elements with the Imperial military and civil service. From the earliest period of British rule in India, officials set about learning Sanskrit in order to translate ancient texts and apply them as law to their

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<sup>35</sup> Consider an article written by a young Brahmin explaining how his experience with Theosophy led him to reject the caste system: "In making this profession, let it be understood that I have taken this step, not because I am a Theosophist, but because in studying Theosophy I have learnt and heard of the ancient splendor and glory of my country—the highly esteemed land of Aryavarta. Joining the Theosophical Society does not interfere with the social, political, or religious relations of any person. All have an equal right in the society to hold their opinions.... The study of Theosophy has thrown a light over me in regard to my country, my religion, my duty. I have become a better Aryan than ever I was. I have similarly heard my Parsi brothers say that they have been better Zoroastrians since they joined the Theosophical Society. I have also seen Buddhists write often to the society that the study of Theosophy has enabled them to appreciate their religion more. And thus this study makes every man respect his religion more. It furnishes to him a sight that can pierce through the dead letter and see clearly the spirit. He can read all his religious books between the lines. If we view all the religions in their popular sense, they appear strongly antagonistic to each other in various details. None agrees with the other. And yet the representatives of those faiths say that the study of Theosophy explains to them all that has been said in their religion and makes them feel a greater sense of respect for it. There must, therefore, be one common ground on which all the religious systems are built. And this ground which lies at the bottom of all, is truth. There can be but one absolute truth, but different persons have different perceptions of that truth." Damodar K Mavalankar, "Castes in India," *The Theosophist* 1, May (1880).

See also Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 321-22.

<sup>36</sup> This invokes a complex problem of the British relationship to the caste system. Nicholas Dirks argues very effectively that the caste system was dying out at the time of the arrival of the British in India. The British revitalized the system as a method of categorizing the other, and as a way of viewing a corollary of the British class system within Indian culture. See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 107-25.



Indian subjects. British colonial knowledge of ancient India was essential to governing the Asian subcontinent. As Said observes:

Proper knowledge of the Orient proceeded from a thorough application of those texts to the modern Orient. Faced with the obvious decrepitude and political impotence of the modern Oriental, the European Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past classical Oriental grandeur in order to “facilitate ameliorations” in the present Orient. What the Europeans took from the classical Oriental past was a vision (and thousands of facts and artifacts) which only he could employ to the best advantage; to the modern Oriental he gave facilitation and amelioration—and, too, the benefit of his judgment as to what was best for the modern Orient.<sup>37</sup>

This quotation could apply to Theosophists as well. Their interest in the East centered on the learning and reinterpreting of ancient texts in the very same process and with the same general goal as the colonial officials. Power over these texts gave the appearance of authority to both. But British colonials used the texts as a way of validating their governing structure, while Theosophists used them to reinterpret Indian religious beliefs. In India, the Theosophical Society had lodges as in the West, and ran libraries, schools, and orphanages, much like Western missionaries. During the society’s early years, there was intense animosity between Theosophists and Christian missionaries, who considered Theosophy a direct threat, as evidenced by the biting attacks on missionaries found in *The Theosophist*.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the missionaries, the Theosophists were more compassionate

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<sup>37</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> See Anon., “A Missionary Whip (No Metaphor),” *The Theosophist* 1, August (1880); Anon., “Missionary Petty Quarrels,” *The Theosophist* 3, November (1881); Anon., “Missionary Progress in India,” *The Theosophist* 4, March (1883); Anon., “Why Rail against Us,” *The Theosophist* 3, July (1882); Helena Blavatsky, “Fruits of the Ceylon Mission,” *The Theosophist* 1, August (1880); Helena Blavatsky, “Journalist Versus Missionary,” *The Theosophist* 1, May (1880); Helena Blavatsky, “On “Theosophism” In India -- The Church Missionary,” *The Theosophist* 3, January (1882); Helena Blavatsky, “Our Duty to India,” *The Theosophist* 1, February (1880); Helena Blavatsky, “Plea by the Methodist Christians in India That the Government Prevent Interference in Their Religion,” *The Theosophist* 2, May (1881); Helena Blavatsky, “The ‘Contradictions of the Bible’ and the Rawal Pindi Mission School,” *The Theosophist* 4, November (1882); Helena Blavatsky, “The Alleged Real Meaning of Educational Missions in India,” *The Theosophist* 2, March (1881); Helena Blavatsky, “The Missionary Question in India,” *The Theosophist* 1, January (1880); Alice Gordon, “Missions in India,” *The Theosophist* 1, January (1880); A. O. Hume,

towards indigenous culture and belief, but both were mostly supportive of British rule.<sup>39</sup>

H. S. Olcott, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, articulated a pragmatic vision for the future of India, which included a clear endorsement of the British presence:

She [India] has survived everything, and she will live to renew her strength. Her best sons are being afforded not only the opportunities of education, but also of training in hundreds of offices in practical statesmanship, under the greatest nation of administrators of modern times.... *European education is creating a new caste which is to guide the nation up the hill*.... If the present peaceful and stable order of things should continue— and surely such would be the sincere prayer of everyone who wishes well to India, for change would mean a plunge back into chaos— we shall see the barriers gradually melt away that have kept the people apart. Gradually realizing that, however distant the Punjab may be from Travancore or Cutch from Bengal, the people are yet brothers, and the children of the same mother. When this conviction shall once possess the whole body of these 24 [Indian provincial districts] then there will, indeed, be the re-birth of this nation.<sup>40</sup>

Olcott further refines his vision in a speech a year later:

What the best friends of India and Ceylon most desire is to see their young men cling to what is good of the olden times, while grasping all that is useful of the modern epoch. That is the civilization which India needs.<sup>41</sup>

He is supportive of British rule, but critical of influences from modern Western culture,

advocating an increased awareness of ancient Aryan culture<sup>42</sup> among Indian natives

through reading ancient Sanskrit texts.<sup>43</sup> The Theosophical Society felt it was an essential

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<sup>39</sup> “Religious Education in India,” *The Theosophist* 4, December (1882); H. R. Morgan, “Review - Social Intercourse between the Natives in India by N.S. Ginwala,” *The Theosophist* 4, September (1883).

<sup>39</sup> Theosophists looked elsewhere for the source of India’s ills, sometimes in quite bizarre places: “While every patriot Hindu bewails the decadence of his country, few realize the real cause. It is neither in foreign rule, excessive taxation, nor crude and exhaustive husbandry, so much as in the destruction of its forests.” Helena Blavatsky, “The Ruin of India,” *The Theosophist* 1, November (1879).

<sup>40</sup> H. S. Olcott, “A Glance at India - Past, Present, and Future,” *The Theosophist* 2, March (1881).

<sup>41</sup> “The Civilization That India Needs,” *The Theosophist* 3, January (1882).

<sup>42</sup> Aryan culture refers to the ancient culture of India.

<sup>43</sup> H. S. Olcott underlines this point: “Christendom has as fine a moral code as one could wish. But she shows her real principles in her Armstrong guns and whiskey distilleries, her opium ships, sophisticated merchandise, prurient amusements, licentious habits and political dishonesty. Christendom, we may almost say, is morally rotten and spiritually paralyzed. If interested missionaries tell you otherwise, don’t believe them upon assertion: go through Christian countries and see for yourselves. Of, if you will not or can not go, then get the proper books and read. And when you have seen, or read, and the horrid truth bursts upon you; when you have lifted the pretty mask of this smiling goddess of Progress, and seen the spiritual

intermediary, in both India and in the West, in the search for universal truths and for ancient Indian culture.<sup>44</sup>

It seems that Theosophy's impact on Cheltenham society was quite small, but its role in the Holst household seems to have been substantial, and may have initiated Gustav Holst's interest in Eastern cultures.<sup>45</sup> Imogen relates in an anecdote that Marie, Gustav Holst's stepmother, "was a Theosophist, and he [Holst] listened to the long conversations that went on in the drawing-room, and then discussed the possibilities of reincarnation with his friends at school."<sup>46</sup> Holst scholar Raymond Head further claims, "In the 1880's the family home was regularly used as a meeting place for the local Theosophists."<sup>47</sup> Such a connection insured that some part of the society's voluminous amount of literature passed through the Holst household, although how much, and if Holst ever read any of it, no one knows. In 1894, Marie became the secretary of the short-lived Cheltenham Theosophical Center of the European Branch of the Theosophical Society.<sup>48</sup> In a letter to *Music and Letters* in response to the first edition of Imogen's *The*

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rotteness there, then, O, young men of sacred India, heirs of great renown, turn to the history of your own land. Read, and be satisfied that it is better to be good than learned; to be pure-minded and spiritual than rich; to be ignorant as a ryot [peasant], with his virtue, than intelligent as a Parisian debauchee, with his vices; to be a heathen Hindu practicing the moralities of Vasiyam [Hindu code] than a progressed and civilized European trampling under foot all the rules that conduce to human happiness and true progress." H. S. Olcott, "The Effects of Theosophy in India," *The Theosophist [Supplement]* 3, January (1882): 90.

<sup>44</sup> As Godwin observes: "After its [Theosophical Society] move to India [it] took on the role of a mouthpiece for Eastern wisdom to address the West." Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 321.

<sup>45</sup> Biographers have viewed Holst's stepmother negatively. She became deeply interested in Theosophy to the detriment of her family. Michael Short blames the fragility of Holst's boyhood health on the neglect of his step-mother. Short, *Gustav Holst*. See also Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*.

<sup>46</sup> Holst, *Gustav Holst: A Biography*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> He continues: "In the 1890's Mrs. Holst took her two sons (Gustav's step-brothers) off to a Theosophy colony in California, probably Ojai." Head, "Holst and India I," 3-4.

<sup>48</sup> The 1894 membership list in *The Theosophist* includes the Cheltenham Centre of the Theosophical Society, Mrs. Von Holst, secretary, 46 Lansdown Crescent Cheltenham. This centre is listed in the annual membership role until 1896. Anon., "List of Membership," *The Theosophist* 16, 1894). The Cheltenham Theosophical Centre never progressed to the larger Lodge status. Though Theosophy would have sympathizers among the retired military and civil servants in Cheltenham, perhaps the animosity between Theosophists and Evangelical missionaries made it unsavory to many within the community.

*Music of Gustav Holst*, her father's stepbrother, Matthias, clarifies the influence of their freethinking household:

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 and I was younger. It coloured his whole life and his music.<sup>49</sup>

Holst's interest in Theosophy continued when he moved to London and enrolled in the Royal College of Music in 1893. He frequented the Theosophical Library, as this letter to his friend Vally Lasker suggests:

I hope you will find the Theosophical library useful. Of the two books I left, the little blue one is very good in places but rather advanced while the big one (by Hartman I think) is sheer drivel... I suggest that when you can afford the time you take a sandwich and some chocolate to Tavistock Square (Russell Sq. Tube) and spend as long as you can in the library. Usually the librarians are very helpful, the chairs are most comfortable and some of the books are really good. Also the freedom of the place is so nice. You take down any books you like— or get the librarian to suggest some— and then sink down in an easy chair near the fire and either read or eat or go to sleep for as long as you like.<sup>50</sup>

For Holst, any incongruence between the Imperial and liberal views he encountered in his Cheltenham upbringing apparently did not lead to inner conflict; a phenomenon that Eric Hobsbawm has explained:

Men and women did not choose collective identification as they chose shoes, knowing that one could only put on one pair at a time. They had, and still have, several attachments and loyalties simultaneously, including nationality, and are simultaneously concerned with various aspects of life, any of which may at any one time be foremost in their minds, as occasion suggests. For long periods of time these different attachments would not make incompatible demands on a person, so that a man might have no problem about feeling himself to be the son of an Irishman, the husband of a German woman, a member of the mining community, a worker, a supporter of Barnsley Football club, a Liberal, a Primitive Methodist, a patriotic Englishman, possibly a Republican, and a supporter of the

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<sup>49</sup> Matthias von Holst, "Correspondence," *Music and Letters* 32, 1951 (1951).

<sup>50</sup> Gustav Holst to Vally Lasker, enroute to Salonika, 21 November 1918.

British Empire. It was only when one of these loyalties conflicted directly with one another or others that a problem of choosing between them arose.<sup>51</sup>

During his formative years growing up in Cheltenham, Holst was exposed to two differing ways of considering the East: Imperialism and Theosophy. These allowed Holst, without conflict, to be Imperial in his contact with the modern East, while at other times respectful and reverent when considering the Hindu philosophy and Sanskrit texts of the ancient East. Holst scholarship has covered the impact of the latter on his music, but the role of his Imperial attitude has largely been ignored, and will be reassessed in the following two chapters. Only then can we fully appreciate the role of Cheltenham in Holst's development.

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<sup>51</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1750*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 123.

### Chapter III

#### “The King of Spain Is a Foul Paynim”: The Intersection of Imperialism and medievalism in *King Estmere*

In 1903, Holst composed the cantata *King Estmere*, which is important to the present study because it represents a mingling of Imperialism and medievalism, and his first attempt at the portrayal of the difference between the East and West in music. Holst alters the text and designs the music to reflect a basic and un-nuanced Imperial message: the Christian West, particularly England, is victorious over the “heathen” East. His motivation in writing the piece is in question, as the message of this work seems to conflict directly with his socialist beliefs, which in turn were influenced by William Morris’s medievalism. The fusion of Imperialism and medievalism in nineteenth-century Britain and Holst’s exposure to medievalism must be explored to grasp fully the Imperial resonances in *King Estmere*, and how they are contrary to Holst’s personal beliefs.

During his childhood, along with living in Imperial Cheltenham and encountering Theosophy, Holst developed a fascination with medievalism and chivalry. According to Alice Chandler, nineteenth-century British medievalism was a “complex yet coherent movement... hard to define and delimit, and yet it was always a recognizable entity and unmistakable tradition.”<sup>1</sup> The influence of medievalism could be seen in areas as diverse as the visual arts (Pre-Raphaelites), politics (Young England movement), architecture (Neo-Gothic Movement), literature (Scott, Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris, Keats, and

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth Century English Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 1.

Coleridge), antiquarianism (Percy), and philosophy (Carlyle and Ruskin).<sup>2</sup> What complicates the construction of a unified theory is that medievalism also spanned the ideological spectrum from reactionary to avant-garde. As the nineteenth-century proceeded, a complex system of interconnections began to emerge:

Medievalism in the nineteenth-century was a constantly evolving and revolving phenomenon. Scott's romantic and historical preoccupation with the medieval period differs substantially from the medievalism with a purpose espoused by Carlyle in the 1840s, which is different again from the art-based philosophy of Ruskin. Morris's medievalism is much more than simply a linear development of the ideas expounded by those who preceded him in the tradition. It remains firmly anchored to that tradition and yet goes beyond it, in that it expresses the particular conditions of society in the second half of the century.<sup>3</sup>

In his boyhood, Holst encountered what was an ideologically conservative view of medievalism in *The Boy's Own Paper*, to which he subscribed,<sup>4</sup> and in the works of Sir Walter Scott, which he began to read in 1893.<sup>5</sup> Scott celebrated and reinforced the feudal system and the chivalric code, where the aristocratic knight benevolently ruled over his grateful serfs, upholding and spreading Christianity through crusading, and saving the occasional maiden.

In order to understand how feudal and chivalric medievalism, espoused by writers like Scott and Thomas Percy, came to be co-opted by British Imperialists, it is necessary

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about the impact of medievalism on British culture, see: Stephanie L. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Liana De Girolami Cheney, ed., *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992); Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris, ed., *William Morris and the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Holst was also winner of its composition prize. The role of this and other publications for children in the rebirth and propagation of chivalric ideals has been examined by Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 266-68.

<sup>5</sup> He eventually set selections from the works of Scott to music in solo and part songs. Examples of those efforts are *Anna-Marie* and *The White Lady's Farewell*, for voice and piano, *Maiden Mild* and *Fathoms Deep Beneath the Wave*, for female chorus, and *Love Wakes and Weeps*, for mixed chorus. All of these pieces date from 1893 and 1894 according to Imogen in *A Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music* (London: Faber Music Ltd. and G. and I. Holst Ltd., 1974), 218, 222, 225.

to explore the background of medievalism in nineteenth-century politics, especially in relation to the administration of the British empire. These considerations will demonstrate how conservative medievalism becomes “Imperialized,” allowing its symbols, such as the knight-errant, to be appropriated for Imperialist imagery and propaganda. Since these are the primary images found in *King Estmere*, and, as we will see, Holst edits Percy’s text to emphasize Estmere’s nobility and chivalrousness and Bremor’s “otherness,” the work, and Holst as its creator, (even if it would not seem to be his intent) contributes to the support and reinforcement of Imperialist policies. I am not suggesting that the events that led to the Imperializing of medievalism were a direct influence on Holst, but rather, once the Imperial culture was in place Holst and *King Estmere* reflect it.

Conservative medievalism was manifested in politics with the appearance of the Young England movement in the 1840s, which “despised utilitarianism, middle-class liberalism, and centralized government... [and] sought to return England to the feudal and monarchal antecedents of its national youth.”<sup>6</sup> Young England was comprised of predominately young aristocrats who wished to reverse the growing power of the industrial middle class, sought an idealized return of chivalry, and a society ordered by landed nobility and the Church of England (who would protect and care for the lesser classes). In return, the lesser classes would defer to the nobility, as in medieval times. The most important figure to come out of this movement (himself, ironically, not an aristocrat) was Benjamin Disraeli, who outlined the aims of the movement in his three novels, *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847).

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Richmond and Paul Smith, *The Self-Fashioning of Disraeli: 1818-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55.



From 1858 onward, with the help of Disraeli (now a leader of the Tory party), the feudal elements once espoused by Young England were grafted onto British colonial policy, conscripting medievalism into the service of the British empire. This appropriation encouraged Imperialists to adopt chivalric and medievalist imagery as symbols of Britain's Imperial power, and these images appear in *King Estmere*, creating an external likenesses between it and British colonial policy.

The practical application of medievalism to an Imperialist project came in the wake of the Indian Mutiny of 1857.<sup>7</sup> In reaction to the horrors of the mutiny, a new philosophy towards the colonies began to develop:

Good would not spread of its own accord. Evil and the devil were real and powerful facts. Most people were not able to govern themselves and needed wise and strong rulers. The English, of all races were the most capable of justly ruling those not able to rule themselves. It was their duty to take the leading role in the world.... England should continue to provide just and strong rule over non-English people already under her sway, and be prepared to extend it over others; and she should accept it as a fact that, even if her subject peoples might one day develop to the state when they were capable of self-government, this would not be for many generations to come.<sup>8</sup>

The first fruit of this emerging Imperial mindset was the India Act of 1858, which was developed by Disraeli and aristocratic Tory leaders. They hoped to create an idealized

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<sup>7</sup> This was a seminal moment in the history of the British empire that severely shook English confidence in a trade-centered Imperial policy that eschewed direct political administration of foreign lands in favor of economic hegemony, and ushered in direct rule of India by the British government, a period commonly referred to as "The British Raj." In 1857, small rebellions in north central India expanded into a full-fledged revolt by Indians all over the country against the British presence. Indigenous men made up the bulk of the British army in India, and many refused to obey their British commanders and put down the rebellion. The British were unprepared for such a revolt, and, by the time reinforcements from Europe arrived to turn the tide in the British favor, British nationals, both military and civilian, had been massacred in the towns of Cawnpore and Jhansi, and many British army garrisons in other towns had been besieged and decimated by the rebels. This event is also called the "Indian Rebellion of 1857," or the "First War of Indian Independence" depending upon the source.

<sup>8</sup> Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, 220-221. As Girouard points out about the men who contributed to the development of this Imperial philosophy: "Carlyle was its founding father, Kingsley and his brother-in-law Froude his disciples; it was increasingly supported by the public schools, given a boost by Ruskin, put into verse by Tennyson, and transmuted into cloudy visual allegories by Watts." As was mentioned earlier all these men were also active in nineteenth-century British medievalism.

society of the kind that was rapidly disappearing in England with the rise of industrialization:

The society which they [the Imperialists] dreamed of creating was paternalistic, hierarchic and rural, such as in England only survived on great landed estates, and even there was being eroded.<sup>9</sup>

To that end, the most important provision of the India Act wrested control of India from the commercial East India Company and gave it to the crown. The government immediately reversed the East India Company policy of annexing Indian princedoms where the ruler died with no direct male heir. This reinvigorated the indigenous Indian aristocracy, all of whom swore fealty to the Sovereign of England, creating a neo-feudal hierarchy of indigenous peoples administered by the British, establishing a tangible link between British foreign policy and representations of feudal England of the kind found in Scott and Percy.

With the connection between Imperialism and medievalism established, and the expansion of the empire and growing enthusiasm at home for Imperial policies in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, chivalric imagery and language came to be used to represent and describe England's colonial endeavors. Modern "knights" would appear in the form of colonial heroes and adventurers such as Cecil Rhodes, General Gordon, and General Kitchener.<sup>10</sup> Paramount in the pantheon of Imperial knighthood, though, was the patron saint of England, recast in medieval guise:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>10</sup> General Gordon was not knighted, but his exploits and heroic death create a parallel. Girouard points out that with the rise of interest in chivalry came an increase in chivalric orders: "The Queen had her knights, both living knights and knights of legend. One of the most obvious effects of the revival of chivalry was the great expansion of the Orders of knighthood. At the beginning of her reign, Victoria presided over some three hundred and fifty knights; by the end, they were approaching two thousand. The Order of the Bath had been enormously expanded; the order of St. Michael and St. George, which when it was founded in 1818 had been confined to Malta and the Ionian Isles, was remodeled, greatly enlarged, and extended to all the colonies in 1869; the Order of the Star of India was founded in 1861 and that of the Indian Empire in

The chivalry of the Empire was presided over by the figure of St. George slaying his dragon. In the early nineteenth-century, he was most often shown as a classical figure wearing a Roman helmet, but by the mid-century, he normally appeared transformed into a knight in armour. The fact that he was England's traditional patron saint, that he was also accepted as the patron saint of chivalry and that slaying dragons, and rescuing those in distress by doing so, beautifully symbolized what the Empire was about.<sup>11</sup>

In 1903, then, when *King Estmere* was composed, its conservative medievalism, portraying a British King subjugating an Eastern 'other' to win a Princess and so bring glory and prosperity to England and its feudal society, could easily be understood to be connected to and reinforcing British Imperial ambitions.

In stark contrast to the conservative medievalism just discussed, is what may be called socialist medievalism, to which Holst had a direct connection, but which is not represented in *King Estmere*. His interest is datable to 1896 when he joined William Morris's Hammersmith Socialist Club.<sup>12</sup> Morris's work in art, literature, politics, and design were heavily influenced by his perceptions of the Middle Ages, especially the medieval guilds,<sup>13</sup> and these helped shape the principles of the club. According to Holst's

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1878; the Victorian Order followed on in 1896; the order of the British Empire was inaugurated in 1917." Ibid., 228-29.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>12</sup> Holst acknowledged the significance of Morris by titling the slow movement of his *Cotswolds Symphony* (1899-1900), "In Elegy William Morris." Much of Holst's professional life as a teacher was devoted to amateur music making, to those who sought relaxation and release during leisure time in amateur choirs and orchestras, demonstrating a strong commitment to Morris's beliefs, which also advocated communal recreation in which to appreciate the arts. See Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Zacaek notes, of Morris's importance: "William Morris was a man of many talents, whose life, and life's work, made a huge impact on the worlds of literature, design and politics. His many ambitions and achievements expressed a profound commitment and belief in an active creative life for all. Morris experimented with every literary genre: prose, political essay, public lecture, and poetry. He established the famous design company, Morris and Co., where he enlarged upon the skills he acquired as an architect to embrace the arts of stained glass, embroidery, wallpaper and furniture design and tapestry. He strove for socialist ideals, both through his various initiatives to create artistic communities inspired by medieval guilds, and, in later life, through his writings, lectures, and marches working for the socialist cause." See Ian Zacaek, *William Morris* (Bath: Parragon, 2001), 6.

student Edmund Rubbra, Morris provided an essential link for Holst between socialism and medievalism:

Our conversation ranged from literature (chiefly the works of Conrad) to the works of Benjamin Kidd (*Social Evolution*) on to socialism, then to art via William Morris, who in his turn reminded us of the Middle Ages and Palestrina and Victoria.<sup>14</sup>

Morris's experiences in the guild-like decorative arts studios of the Arts and Crafts movement converted him to the socialist cause of improving conditions for workers. His socialism was more urbane than the militarist Social Democrats, from which his group split. His ideals were that of a community founded on the medieval guilds where workers would be skilled artisans, drawing fulfillment from their expertise while working to the group's betterment. This approach could counter industrialization, mass production, and the inherent social inequalities of modern society. While members of the Hammersmith Socialist Club advocated such changes to English society, they did so through the publication of pamphlets, peaceful demonstrations, and debate. They did not endorse the terrorist tactics of the anarchists, and were only marginally involved in the practical political activities of the Fabians to effect change within the law.<sup>15</sup> Holst's own involvement in Morris's Society gives insight into its leisure activities, as demonstrated by a program from a concert Holst conducted.

### **Figure 3.1 Program of the Hammersmith Socialist Choir**

Hammersmith Socialist Choir  
Glee Concert and Dramatic Entertainment

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<sup>14</sup> Edmund Rubbra and Stephen Lloyd, *Gustav Holst* (London: Triad Press, 1974), 42.

<sup>15</sup> The Fabian Society worked hard within the confines of British law to establish a political presence for socialists, advocating a gradual transformation of British culture and politics rather than revolutionary change. Among their goals were a minimum wage for workers, a national health service, and the abolition of hereditary peers. They also favored the nationalization of land and industry. Over time, the Fabians absorbed smaller socialist organizations such as Morris's group, and in the early twentieth-century joined with labor unions to form the descendant of the present day Labor Party. See Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society* (New York: E. T. Dutton and Co., 1916).

Friday, 26 March [1898] 8PM  
THE ATHENAEUM  
Goldhawk Road, Shepherd's Bush

Part I

Socialist Song	No Master	William Morris
Glee	It Was a Lover and His Lass	Morley
Two Choruses	With Drooping Wings ( <i>Dido and Aeneas</i> )	Purcell
	The Nereids and Tritons ( <i>The Tempest</i> )	
Chorus	Faithful and True ( <i>Lohengrin</i> )	Wagner
Glee	Who Shall Win the Lady Fair	R. Pearsall
Humorous Glee	Bold Turpin (Sam Weller's song)	J. F. Bridge
Partsong	Clear and Cool	Holst
Motet	Ave Verum	Mozart
March	"Hail Bright Abode" ( <i>Tannhäuser</i> )	Wagner

Accompanist T. F. Dunhill  
Conductor G. von Holst

Part II

An original Comedy in one act:  
"The Anarchist"  
by Fritz B Hart  
[Holst plays Benjamin Beechcroft (Philanthropist)]  
Concert ends with Marseillaise

The first half, though opening with a popular socialist song, is hardly ideological in tone or content. Nothing is known about the plot of the comedy, but its title suggests a lampoon of the more extreme revolutionaries on the fringe of the socialist movement.<sup>16</sup> Medievalism is one theme that does run through the concert, in the evocation of a utopian past in the glees and part songs, the excerpts from Wagner's works set in quasi-medieval times, and the playing of Purcell and Morley evoking a "Merrie England" of the distant past. Even the Mozart anachronistically evokes England's medieval Roman Catholic past, although it was more likely the piece was included for its musical attractiveness and accessibility for amateur choir.

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<sup>16</sup> The interaction of idealistic socialists and violent anarchists in England at this time is illustrated throughout Joseph Conrad's Novel, *The Secret Agent*.

Principles of brotherhood, communal work, and the importance of creative art, which Morris derived from the medieval, reflect beliefs that Holst would articulate throughout his life in his actions, his letters, and his music. As Vaughan Williams noted:

It was Holst's strong sense of human sympathy which brought him when a young man into contact with William Morris and the Kelmscott Club [Hammersmith Socialist Club]. The tawdriness of London, its unfriendliness, the sordidness of its riches and poverty were overwhelming to an enthusiastic and sensitive youth; and to him the ideals of Morris, the insistence on beauty in every detail of human life and work, were a revelation. No wonder that the poetic socialism of the Kelmscott Club became the natural medium of his aspirations; to Morris and his followers "comradeship" was no pose but an absolute necessity of life. And though as years go on Holst has grown out of the weak points of Morris's teaching, yet his ideal thoroughness of beauty and above all of comradeship have remained and grown stronger.<sup>17</sup>

*King Estmere* seems to espouse a view diametrically opposed to socialist medievalism, a contradiction that may be explained in the dedication of the work to his former teacher, Charles Villiers Stanford, whose views were more in keeping with conservative medievalism; the implications of this suggestion will be addressed shortly.

Holst's setting of the Estmere ballad deepens the connections to conservative medievalism through its heroic portrayal of Estmere and Bremor and its musical "othering" of Bremor. Holst drew his setting of *King Estmere* from Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a seminal work of eighteenth century antiquarianism, which had a profound influence on nineteenth-century medievalism. It was the "ballad collection that was largely responsible for the new interest in romance and balladic poetry,"<sup>18</sup> and it was reprinted both in scholarly and in popular editions

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal*, 12-13.

throughout the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries.<sup>19</sup> First published in 1765, the core set of ballads were “discovered” when Percy found servants in a friend’s house using the manuscript on which they were written as kindling.<sup>20</sup> To these he added other ballads ranging from the fourteenth century to his own time, including some he composed himself. Percy published this collection in three volumes with prefatory essays and notes. He took great license with the texts, adding and removing as he saw fit to make the works more appealing to the tastes of his time. The influence and popularity of the Robin Hood ballads, the Arthurian ballads, and the Ballad of Chevy Chase, all found within Percy’s collection, were enormous.<sup>21</sup>

There are five main characters in the Estmere ballad: Estmere, King of England; Adler Younge, his brother;<sup>22</sup> Adland, King of an unnamed land; the Princess, Adland’s daughter; and Bremor, King of Spain. The story found in Percy is as follows: A narrator begins with a bardic invocation, asking the audience to pay attention and hear the story of King Estmere and his brother Adler. Estmere seeks a wife and Adler suggests the beautiful daughter of King Adland, whom he would marry if he were Estmere. The brothers go to see her.

They find Adland at the gate of his hall. He welcomes the brothers, but informs them that Bremor, the King of Spain, has sought his daughter’s hand and been refused. Adler reacts in disgust: Bremor is a Muslim and therefore unsuitable to marry a Christian Princess. Estmere asks to meet her and Adland acquiesces, noting that this is the first

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<sup>19</sup> The British library holds more than fifty editions and reprints of the *Reliques* printed between 1765 and 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Though improbable and unverifiable, this story has persevered in the historiography of the *Reliques*. See Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46-8.

<sup>21</sup> See Laura Lambdin, *Camelot in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press); Kevin L. Morris, *The Image of the Middle Ages in Romantic and Victorian Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> It is not clear if they are biological brothers or chivalrous brothers in arms. Adler’s mention of his magical mother suggests that if they are biologically related, they are stepsiblings.

time in seven years that she has visited the hall. The Princess enters in procession, and when she and Estmere see each other; they immediately profess their love. When she agrees to marry him, King Adland interjects: he fears that Bremor, who has vowed to return and claim his wife, will attack and destroy the kingdom. The Princess is undeterred, believing her father's fortifications can resist such an attack, and requests that Estmere swear an oath of marriage to her.

The brothers leave to gather courtiers for the wedding. In the meantime, Bremor returns with a large force of soldiers and barons, to marry the Princess and take her to his kingdom. She sends a messenger to Estmere, and Adler devises a plan to save her. He learned magic from his mother, and proposes to use it (in the manner typical of medieval tales) to deceive and defeat Bremor and his men.

Estmere and Adler return to Adland's hall, disguised as a harper and singer from the North Country, when a porter recognizes them. They pay him for his silence, and ride ostentatiously into the banqueting hall, insulting Bremor by allowing their horses to fling "froth" onto his beard. Estmere boasts that Adler can beat any of Bremor's men. The soldier chosen senses Adler's magic, and refuses to fight.

Estmere plays his harp, bewitching the Princess. Bremor notices this, and offers to buy the harp. Estmere refuses and offers instead to buy the Princess. Bremor refuses, noting, "More seemelye it is for her fayre bodye to lye by mee then thee." When Estmere plays again Adler sings, revealing their identities. Adler kills the unwary Bremor and he and Estmere defeat the Spanish soldiers. Estmere claims the Princess, escorting her back to England to be his wife.



Percy's *Reliques* contained analytical essays and introductions, and a glossary of unfamiliar terms. These supplements were not published in every edition, but it seems clear from his setting of the text that Holst had access to them.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Holst's musical setting suggests that he was familiar with Percy's introduction to *Estmere*. In it, Percy remarks that some might find it strange when the brothers discover Adland at his gate. Holst captures this moment musically through a completely unexpected cadence in G-flat where G is expected, denoting a sense of surprise.

**Figure 3.2 Adland at his gate, *King Estmere*, measures 143-160**

The musical score for measures 143-160 of *King Estmere* is presented in four systems. The first system is for the Alto voice, starting with the tempo marking *Poco meno mosso* and dynamic *mp*. The lyrics are "And when they came to king Ad-land's hall Be fore the good-lye gate:". The second system is for the Piano accompaniment, starting with *Poco meno mosso* and dynamic *p*. The third system is for the Soprano voice, starting with the tempo marking *Molto meno mosso* and dynamic *p dolce*. The lyrics are "There they found good king Ad-land Lean-ing him-self there-att.". The fourth system is for the Piano accompaniment, starting with *Molto meno mosso* and dynamic *p*, ending with a *dim.* marking.

Holst updates Percy's Old English to aid comprehension,<sup>24</sup> but he also removes the text that questions the chivalric character of the heroes, and diminishes the evil nature

<sup>23</sup> Particularly archaic words in Holst's libretto, such as "nicked," (refused) were given a footnote in the score to clarify their meaning, which suggests Holst used an edition by Percy with a glossary. In 1925, more than 20 years after writing *King Estmere*, Holst wrote a letter to his publisher citing as a source for a text in his opera *At the Boar's Head*, the 1900 Bohm's Standard Library edition of Percy edited by Prichard. This could also be the Holst's source for *Estmere*, but there are significant differences between this edition and the Holst text. It is more likely that he consulted the 1891 edition edited by Wheatley, as it contains both a glossary and supplemental writings, and was a fairly inexpensive edition. He could also have consulted the 1900 one volume edition edited by Walford, but it is unlikely that this is the main source for Holst's text, as it does not include a glossary, from which Holst could have drawn the translations of certain "Old English" words, which he included in the manuscript and printed scores.

<sup>24</sup> Holst modernizes the spellings of the old English and simplifies the syntax in places, for example: Percy:

Yesterday was att my deere daughter

of the villain.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he introduces orchestral interludes (marked as I<sub>x</sub> in Table 3.a, which outlines the structure of the piece) that divide the action of the story into musical sections. These interludes depict either a change in location (as in I<sub>1</sub>), and/or an elaboration of events described in the text (as in I<sub>2</sub> which elaborates the arrival of the Princess, or I<sub>3</sub>, the arrival of Sir Bremor).

**Table 3.a Location of Musical interludes in *King Estmere***

<u>Section</u>	<u>Measure numbers</u>	<u>Length</u>	<u>Plot Action</u>
A	1-103	102	Introduction, Adler suggests Princess, agreement to visit Princess
I <sub>1</sub>	104-112	8	Travel to Adland's hall
B	113-204	91	Arrive, Meet Adland, Adler enquires after his daughter, Adland tells of Bremor's visit, Adler objects, Estmere asks to meet Princess, Adland agrees
I <sub>2</sub>	204-219	15	Entrance of Princess
C	220-331	111	Princess appears, Princess and Estmere meet and fall in love, Adland objects, she rejects his objection, Princess makes Estmere swear an oath, Estmere leaves to get courtiers
I <sub>3</sub>	332-352	20	Arrival of Bremor and Soldiers at

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The king his sonne of Spayn,  
 And then she nicked him of naye,  
 And I doubt sheele do you the same.

Holst:

Yesterday was at my dear daughter  
 Sir Bremor the King of Spain  
 And then she nicked him of nay,  
 And I doubt she'll do you the same.

These changes have little or no effect on the meaning of the text, but they do enhance clarity. These were also included in the published version of the score.

<sup>25</sup> The cut stanzas are 17, 41, 43-55, 60-62. Raymond Head has suggested that audience indignation to the unsavory actions and comments of the characters led Holst to make textual cuts. He notes: "The text of *King Estmere* uses the kind of authentic words that Vaughan Williams had urged on Holst (hence the need for a glossary). In selecting his stanzas, Holst, careful not to offend, left out some of the more salacious examples." Raymond Head, liner notes for *Holst: The Morning of the Year, The Golden Goose, King Estmere*, Royal Philharmonic and Hilary Davan Wetton, Hyperion CDA66784, 9.

			Adland's hall
D	353-511	158	Bremor appears, Princess calls Estmere back, Adler devises a plan
I <sub>4</sub>	511-542	31	Arrival of Estmere and Adler in disguise through magic
E	543-599	56	Estmere plays his harp, Princess reacts, Bremor asks him to stop then offers to buy the harp to make him stop
I <sub>5</sub>	600-609	9	Magic harp
F	610-752	142	Estmere plays again, Adler sings revealing their identity, Adler kills Bremor, he and Estmere defeat Bremor's soldiers
I <sub>6</sub>	753-765	12	Bremor's men defeated
G	766-777	11	Those soldiers who are left flee
I <sub>7</sub>	778-787	9	Estmere's victory
H	788-859	71	Estmere marries the Princess and they live happily ever after

The longest interlude, I<sub>4</sub>, also corresponds directly to the largest cut Holst made to Percy's text. Removing this section eliminates Estmere's dishonorable and reprehensible acts (bribing of the guard, allowing horse to throw spittle on Bremor's beard), and omits evidence of Bremor's nobility and fairness (his welcome to the strangers despite their rudeness) . The interludes increase in frequency near the end, giving music the time to portray the enchanted minstrel's music and the defeat of Bremor's men (interludes I<sub>5</sub> and I<sub>6</sub>).

Holst's final textual cut further alters Estmere's character (the cut comes at the end of E in Table 3.a), and deserves special attention because of the racial implications that may be contained within it. The three omitted stanzas comprise Estmere's response to Bremor, after the Muslim attempts to buy his harp:

“What wold ye doe with my harpe,” he sayd, [Estmere]  
“If I did sell itt yee?”  
“To playe my wiffe and me a fitt,  
When abed together wee bee.”

“Now sell me,” quoth hee, “thy bryde soe gay,  
As shee sitts by thy knee;  
And as many gold nobles I will give  
As leaves been on a tree.”

“And what wold ye doe with my bryde soe gay,  
Iff I did sell her thee?  
More seemelye it is for her fayre bodye  
To lye by mee then thee.”

Estmere’s crude attempt to buy his lover, rather than fight for her honor, further demonstrates his less than heroic demeanor, reason enough for Holst to cut the passage. Why, though, is it more seemly for the Princess to lie beside Sir Bremor in bed than the disguised northern harpist? Obviously, the noble King of Spain is more acceptable a match for the Princess than a minstrel, but the nature of King Estmere’s disguise suggests another answer. When Adler first explains his plan to win the Princess, he says:

There growes an hearbe within this field,  
And iff it were but knowne,  
His color, which is whyte and redd,  
It will make blacke and browne.

This text would seem to indicate that part of King Estmere’s magical disguise as a harper of the North Country involves changing his skin from white to black. When Estmere and Adler first entered Adland’s court (near the opening of the work), there was the line “and red golde shown their weedyes [clothes],” which established they were dressed in red. The Spanish King was likely to have brown skin befitting peoples of Moorish and North African descent. Bremor’s comments may suggest a complex hierarchy of racial

desirability, which Holst avoids altogether by cutting this passage,<sup>26</sup> removing the last vestige of any ignoble acts on the part of Estmere and Adler.

The stanzas that remain after Holst's editing are enough for the listener to understand that Bremor is different, an "other" in religion, race, and chivalry. Percy's introduction to *Estmere* may have influenced Holst's understanding of Bremor:

It should seem to have been written while a great part of Spain was in the hands of the Saracens or Moors; whose empire there was not fully extinguished before the year 1491. The Mahometans are spoken of in v.49, &c, just in the same terms as in all other old romances.<sup>27</sup>

Bremor's religious unsuitability is forcibly captured by Adler's reaction to his proposal to the Princess.<sup>28</sup> The text is: "The King of Spain is a foul Paynim, and 'leaveth in Mahound.<sup>29</sup> Pity it were that maiden fair should marry a heathen hound." Holst's dissonant setting of the word "Mahound" makes perfectly clear Holst's interpretation of Adler's negative opinion of Islam.

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<sup>26</sup> Were Holst aware of prevailing late nineteenth-century evolutionary theories regarding Celtic races, which were likened to a subhuman human species, and portrayed as dark skinned as Africans, he might also have sensed the liability of leaving this passage in his music and dedicating the piece to his Anglo-Irish teacher, Stanford.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (Philadelphia: T. F. Bell, 1860), 71.

<sup>28</sup> There is no suggestion that Bremor is cruel, unjust, unchivalrous, or ugly. The only facts we know about Bremor outside that he is from Spain and a knight is that he is Muslim.

<sup>29</sup> The Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines 'paynim' as a "Pagan, especially Muslim. " 'Mahound' is a corruption of Mohammed.

Figure 3.3 Adler's rejection of Bremor, *King Estmere*, measures 179-195

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 179-186) features a Bass vocal line with lyrics: "Yes - ter - day was at my deardaugh - ter Sir Bre - mor the king of Spain And then she nicked him of nay, And I doubt she'll do you the". The piano accompaniment includes dynamics *f* and *mp*, and a triplet of eighth notes. The second system (measures 187-194) features Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass vocal lines with lyrics: "The king of Spain The king of Spain is a foule pay - nim And same." and "The king of Spain The king of Spain is a foule pay - nim And". The piano accompaniment includes dynamics *f* and *accel.*. The third system (measures 195-198) features Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass vocal lines with lyrics: "leev - eth in Ma - hound! And pi - ty 'twere that la - dye fair should mar - ry a hea - then hound." and "leev - eth in Ma - hound! And pi - ty 'twere that la - dye fair should mar - ry a hea - then hound." and "leev - eth in Ma - hound! And pi - ty 'twere that la - dye fair should mar - ry a hea - then hound." and "leev - eth in Ma - hound! And pi - ty 'twere that la - dye fair should mar - ry a hea - then hound." The piano accompaniment includes dynamics *pp*, *p*, *mf*, and tempo markings *rall.* and *Moderato*. Performance markings include *portamento* and *dim.*

Bremor's race is underscored when the narrator refers to him as a "sowdan," after Adler kills him. Percy includes a digression into the history of the word "sowdan" in the concluding notes to the *Estmere* ballad:

Another frequent character in the old pageants or interludes of our ancestors, was the sowdan or soldan, representing a grim Eastern tyrant.... The sowdain or soldan, was a name given to the Sarazen king (being only a more rude pronunciation of the word sultan) as the soldan of Egypt, the soudan of Persia, the sowdan of Babylon, &c, who were generally represented as accompanied with grim Sarazens, whose business it was to punish and torment Christians.<sup>30</sup>

Percy clearly connects Bremor to the East, specifically the Moorish peoples the near East, and links his tyranny to his Easternness. These references to Bremor's religion and race in both Percy and Holst suggest that his 'otherness' was the principal reason why he was rejected by the Princess.

Chivalric 'otherness' is implicit in the Princess's refusal to come down into the hall to meet Bremor, which she does for Estmere. The chivalric code stresses honorable hand to hand combat, and that the brothers resort to deception and magic to win the Princess, rather than challenging Bremor to a fight suggests they feel that the chivalric code does not apply to him.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 75-6.

<sup>31</sup> However, as Percy points out, there are instances, if the chivalric code has already been transgressed, when a person of nobility dons the guise of a bard or minstrel to win back what has been unjustly taken. *Ibid.*, ix-xxii. There is also the example of Richard the Lion-Hearted in Scott's *Ivanhoe*, who masquerades as a bard before revealing his true identity, without any loss of prestige or respect. In *Estmere* the issue rests on Bremor's rights marry the Princess, which are made ambiguous by King Adland's objection to Estmere swearing an oath of marriage to his daughter: "My daughter I say nay. Remember well the King of Spain, what he said yesterday: he would tear down my walls and castles, and reeve me of my life. I could not blame him if he do so if I reeve [bereave] him of his wife." If Bremor did have a legitimate claim on the Princess, which she attempts to break by swearing an oath of marriage to Estmere, then this confirms Bremor's chivalric otherness. Alternatively, if Bremor had no prior claim, and returned to claim the Princess by force, which is the scenario suggested by Holst's setting in the militaristic music of interlude I<sub>3</sub>, then the brothers were perfectly within the chivalric tradition to don disguises and use deception to defeat Bremor. In any case, this is a fine point which requires intimate knowledge of bardic traditions, and would probably have been beyond the perception and interest of audiences who would easily understand from Holst's shaping of the text and musical setting that Bremor is the villain.

Holst's setting of *King Estmere* is scored for four-part choir with orchestral accompaniment. Published in 1906 by Novello, it did not receive a performance until 4 April 1908 in the Queens Hall at the first concert of the Edward Mason Choir with the New Symphony Orchestra conducted by Edward Mason,<sup>32</sup> along with the premiere of Edgar Bainton's *Tubal Cain*. Reviews were generally positive but unenthusiastic. The *Musical Times* critic wrote:

King Estmere was quite new and proved to be of a more important character [than *Tubal Cain*]. It is a setting of the old English ballad that relates how King Estmere of England defeated his rival and won his wife from the clutches of the King of Spain. The music reflects the spirit of this chivalric romance and that valiant sturdiness which are the chief characteristics of the poem. Imagination and cleverness go hand in hand in the choral and instrumental writing, which, moreover, testifies to dramatic intuition.<sup>33</sup>

The critic for *The Times* was slightly more pragmatic, noting that the two premieres were:

straightforward ballads for chorus and orchestra without subtlety of expression, but carried along by genial melody. Mr. von Holst has been daring in undertaking to set a ballad of over 200 lines, which tells a long story of love and adventure in a leisurely manner proper to the old ballad. The work does not quite hold the attention from beginning to end, but the whole is spirited, and the real wonder is that there are not more dull moments than there are.<sup>34</sup>

*Estmere* is through-composed and the setting is harmonically fluid, in keeping with a fascination with Wagnerian musical style that permeates Holst's compositional style in this period. The most complicated harmonic passages are left to the orchestra, and, over this, the chorus parts are often in rhythmic unison with short interpolated sections of imitation. The chorus represents all the characters in the story, including that of the narrator. Holst makes a distinction between individual characters by employing representative voice ranges for different dramatic situations. For example, when the

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<sup>32</sup> See Imogen Holst, *A Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music* (London: Faber Music Ltd. and G. and I. Holst Ltd., 1974), 54-55.

<sup>33</sup> Anon., "London Music Makings," *Musical Times* 49, no. 783, 1908).

<sup>34</sup> "Concerts," *The Times*, 6 April 1908.



Princess first speaks (m. 248), her part is sung by the sopranos and altos in unison. After the Princess's feminine musical character is established, the men join (m. 253). The voice ranges are used similarly when Adler is magically disguised. Previously he had been represented predominately by the tenors, but here, while disguised as a boy; his part is taken by the sopranos and altos in unison, and joined by the men (m. 648) only when he reveals their disguise. By mixing and inflecting the choral parts this way, Holst retains each character's individuality, perhaps alleviating the need for soloists in a piece intended for amateur choir.

Though he never indicated this, Holst uses associative themes as a unifying device. The four most important of these relate to Estmere, Love, Bremor, and Adler's magic. These often substantial themes appear at appropriate dramatic moments and are susceptible to fragmentation and variation, but are rarely heard together. They lack the terseness and flexibility of Wagnerian leitmotifs.

### Figure 3.4 List of Associative Themes, *King Estmere*

Estmere's theme measures 27-34

The musical score for Estmere's theme (measures 27-34) is presented in three staves. The top staff is for Tenor, the middle for Bass, and the bottom for Piano. The time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "Hear - ken to me gent - le - men Come and you shall hear a tale of the bold - est bre - thren That ev - er borne y - were." The piano accompaniment features a series of chords in the right hand and a simple bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *sfz* (sforzando).

Love theme, initial presentation, measures 62-75

*a tempo*

SOPRANO

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

PIANO

*p dolce*

King— Ad - land hath a

King— Ad - land hath a daugh-ter, Men call her bright and sheen: King— Ad - land hath a

*a tempo*

*p*

**Poco meno mosso**

*p dolce*

8

S. King— Ad - land hath a daugh - ter, Men call her bright and sheen:

A. daugh - ter, Men call her bright and sheen: King Ad - land hath a daugh - ter, Men call her bright and sheen:

T. daugh - ter, Men call her bright and sheen: King Ad - land hath a daugh - ter, Men call her bright and sheen:

B. King— Ad - land hath a daugh - ter, Men call her bright and sheen:

*p dolce*

**Poco meno mosso**

Love theme, second appearance, measures 220-228

*p dolce*

*senza cresc.*

SOPRANO

PIANO

Down then came that maid - en fair With la - dies laced in pall, And

S. half a hun - dred of bold knights To bring her from bower to hall.

Pno.

Love theme, culmination, measures 253-261

SOPRANO  
ALTO  
TENOR  
BASS  
PIANO

"And if you love me as you say So well and heart - i - lee All that

*f* *p*

6 **Poco allegro**

S.  
A.  
T.  
B.

ev - er you are come a - bout, Soon sped now it shall be."

ev - er you are come a - bout, Soon sped now it shall be."

ev - er you are come a - bout, Soon sped now it shall be."

ev - - - er you are come a - bout Soon sped now it shall be."

*p* **Poco allegro**

Bremor's theme, measures 332-339

*Alla marcia ma non troppo allegro*

*pp*

### Adler's magic theme, measures 472-492

SOPRANO  
ALTO  
TENOR  
BASS  
PIANO

*f* "And you shall be a har-per Out of the north coun-tree, And I'll be your boy so fain of fight And bear your harp by your  
*f* "And you shall be a har-per Out of the north coun-tree, And I'll be your boy so fain of fight And bear your harp by your  
*f* "And you shall be a har-per Out of the north coun-tree, And I'll be your boy so fain of fight And bear your harp by your  
*f* "And you shall be a har-per Out of the north coun-tree, And I'll be your boy so fain of fight And bear your harp by your

*11*  
S. knee: And you shall be the best har-per That e're took harp in hand, And I will be the best sin-ger That e-ver sung in this land."  
A. knee: And you shall be the best har-per That e're took harp in hand, And I will be the best sin-ger That e-ver sung in this land."  
T. knee: And you shall be the best har-per That e're took harp in hand, And I will be the best sin-ger That e-ver sung in this land."  
B. knee: And you shall be the best har-per That e're took harp in hand, And I will be the best sin-ger That e-ver sung in this land."

*poco rall.* **Con spirito**  
*poco rall.* **Con spirito**

These associative themes suggest how Holst wanted each character to be understood. King Estmere's theme nearly always appears in major keys and has a valiant tone and martial swagger, in part suggested by leaps and dotted rhythms. The heroic quality of the music is unmistakable.<sup>35</sup>

The love theme is a relaxed contrast to the Estmere theme, marked *dolce* and distinguished by stepwise melodic motion. There are three variants, each with greater length, harmonic stability, orchestral accompaniment, and elaboration than its predecessor. The third variant (see figure 3.4) is used as the basis for the extended

<sup>35</sup> The theme, though, undergoes transformation when Estmere is disguised by magic (see mm. 524-525, 528-529). Interestingly, the Estmere theme has a folk inflection, almost like a sea-shanty, a notable characteristic as the work predates compositions by Holst which overtly reference folksong material.

imitative section that closes the piece (mm. 788-853), a musical “happily ever after” that confirms Estmere’s triumph and the superiority of chivalry and Western culture, whereby the victorious knight wins the hand of the fair maiden, defeating the Eastern tyrant. Holst’s development of the love theme also attests to the “cleverness” and “dramatic intuition” mentioned in reviews of the piece.

The theme for Adler’s magic closely relates to Estmere’s in tone and construction. Both use dotted rhythms and stepwise motion, but magic, especially at its presentation at measure 476, sounds distinct through its use of longer note values and distinct melodic contours. The sound of the harp, the traditional instrument of the bard, appears only after Adler has weaved his magic, becoming an aural reflection of it, as when Estmere first appears in disguise at the Hall of King Adland (m. 511). At this moment, the forward motion of the piece slows while Estmere, represented musically in the strings by a disguised version of the Estmere theme, plays the magic harp, enchanting all within its sound.

Bremor’s theme reflects his otherness, characterized harmonically by perfect intervals and rhythmically by three clipped hammer blows followed by a triplet. It always appears in minor keys and seems to seethe with menace. In addition, the use of percussion, especially cymbals, suggests the evocation of a traditional characterization of the Eastern “other” in music since the time of Haydn and Mozart, namely, the Turkish janissary band.<sup>36</sup>

Good King Estmere triumphs over the Eastern tyrant, winning the Princess, and demonstrating the superiority of the English over the East. The role of feudalism and chivalry in late nineteenth-century British Imperialism, and the similarities between the

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<sup>36</sup> See Mackenzie, *Orientalism*, 138-175.

figure of Estmere and appropriated Imperial figures as General Gordon or even St. George, allows the possibility that *King Estmere* could be read as espousing the continued greatness of British Imperialism. It also joins works by British composers celebrating figures similar to Estmere, including Edward Elgar's *The Banner of St. George* (1897) and *Caracatus* (1898), and Charles Villiers Stanford's *The Revenge* (1886), *Battle of the Baltic* (1891), and *Songs of the Sea* (1904). In each, a chivalrous and honorable individual, representing Britain, defeats foes who would threaten the British way of life.

*King Estmere* can be seen as a part of this tradition, although the tepid reviews suggest that this aspect of the piece was missed or disregarded. Because the premiere was part of a choir concert of British first performances, reviewers may have focused more on the musical setting than if it had debuted at some commemorative or national event, where the Imperial implications would have been at the forefront of reception. It could also be that reviewers sensed the Imperial element in *Estmere*, but that such sentiments were so commonplace in *fin-de-siècle* British society, that they did not warrant mention.

How can a portrayal of conservative medievalism in Holst's music be reconciled to his socialist beliefs, which depend on a completely different interpretation of the past? In the only surviving comment Holst made about *King Estmere*, in a private letter written to Edwin Evans in 1911, he called it light music:

I have something within me that prompts me to write quite light music every now and then. For instance my *Suite in E-flat* written in 1899 and performed in 1904 by the Patron's Fund; *Two Songs Without Words* for small orchestra done at the R.C.M. in 1906 and published by Novello; a *Suite in E-flat* for military band; and *King Estmere* written in 1903 and done twice in London (Edwin Mason's choir 1908 and Handel Society in 1910). All these are as genuinely a part of me as the

Veda hymns. The question of their ultimate values lies with the critic— with you. But they are not pot-boilers and I shall probably continue to do this sort of thing.<sup>37</sup>

It therefore seems likely that *Estmere*, unlike *Sāvitri* or *Beni Mora*, was not a personal expression of deeply held beliefs. Rather, written shortly after leaving the Royal College of Music, it is an attempt to appeal to popular taste, to write an attractive and accessible work that could be sung by choral groups around the country, demonstrating that, contrary to his attitude later in life, there was a time when Holst allowed public expectations to shape his music.

Holst's dedication of *Estmere* to his old teacher Charles Villiers Stanford may have been an act of homage and thanks, but it also could have been an attempt to curry favor. According to Holst biographer Jon Mitchell, the summer Holst wrote *King Estmere*, he and his wife were especially strapped financially:

They were in dire need, since Holst did not take any “worming” jobs [work playing trombone in seaside bands or theatre orchestras]. To make up the lost income from these jobs, he wrote a couple of potboilers which brought in a little bit of money and Isobel helped supplement that feeble income through some dressmaking.<sup>38</sup>

Stanford had influence and power in British musical circles as conductor of the Leeds Festival, Professor of Music at Cambridge University, and Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music (whose duties included conducting the orchestra and overseeing the playing through of newly composed works). Perhaps Holst hoped that in dedicating *King Estmere* to Stanford, performances, commissions, or helpful contacts might result. Perhaps the tone and content of the work were designed to appeal to Stanford who was a conservative-unionist politically. Many of his works (notably his choral ballad, *The Revenge*, and song cycles *Songs of the Sea* and *Songs of the Fleet*),

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*, 99.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

celebrate, implicitly or otherwise, the attitude of superiority found in *King Estmere*. This seems the most plausible explanation for why there seems to be so little of Holst's turn-of-the-century socialist beliefs in *King Estmere*. In the end, though, the dedication did little to alleviate Holst's dire straits, as it was three years before the work was published, and five years before it was performed.

It is not clear if Holst saw no contradiction in being both a socialist and chauvinist Imperialist,<sup>39</sup> or if he adopted the chauvinist attitude as a means to appeal to his old teacher and perhaps the public at large. The truth is likely found somewhere between these two possibilities. It is likely, based on his youth in Cheltenham, the letters he wrote, and pieces like *King Estmere* and *Beni Mora*, that Holst was a man of his time, with strong beliefs in socialist principles, but who also saw the inhabitants of the East as inferior to the English. The motivations behind the composition of *King Estmere* will probably never be clear, but consideration reveals a work appealing for its adventurous romantic medievalism. The conflict between East and West is hackneyed, and the characters meant to represent both are stereotypes of the heroic knight, and the sinister heathen. At the same time, it celebrates and confirms England's righteous Christian values and power in the world, and strikes an Imperialist, conservative, and patriotic note. Holst was comfortable being connected with the message the piece espoused, as he actively sought its publication. As Holst continued to study Sanskrit philosophy and eventually travel to Algeria and Turkey, his notions about the relationship between East and West became more nuanced, but not less Imperial, as his "oriental suite" *Beni Mora* demonstrates.

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<sup>39</sup> The possibility that a person could hold two seemingly contradictory beliefs concurrently was theorized by the historian Eric Hobsbawm. See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1750*, 123.



## Chapter IV

### Imperialism Confirmed: Holst's Voyage to *The Garden of Allah*

In 1906, after *Sita* had taken second place in the Ricordi competition and Holst suppressed the score, he took a four-week vacation to Algeria. Imogen Holst recounts his adventures, using colorful and amusing anecdotes that entertain but explain little of where he went, what he did, and why. Holst took this vacation alone, leaving his wife of five years to care for Imogen, who was a year old at the time. Imogen's account of Holst's trip, repeated in more recent biographies, leaves fascinating questions unanswered. Imogen states that the reason for the trip was to ride a bicycle in the desert to ameliorate her father's neuritis and exhaustion from overwork. But how would bumping down rough dirt roads on a rickety bicycle relieve either exhaustion or neuritis? Why did Holst go alone, and why, of all places, to Algeria? At the turn of the twentieth-century it was most famous as a sensual playground where all manner of sexual gratification was available. André Gide famously wrote about this aspect of Algeria in *Si le grain ne meurt*, and the area was also a favorite haunt of Oscar Wilde and Lord Lindsey.<sup>1</sup> Upon the merest reflection, the reasons given for Holst's trip seem suspicious, and become more so in light of the musical fruits of his trip, the orchestral suite, *Beni Mora*.

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<sup>1</sup> Both enjoyed various sexual escapades involving young boys and men while in Algeria. For more information on Andre Gide and Oscar Wilde's exploits in Algeria see: Jonathan Fryer, *Andre and Oscar: Gide, Wilde and the Gay Art of Living* (London: Constable, 1997), 106-120.

Holst's letters home provide the only evidence of his exploits in Algeria, and they also capture his Imperial mindset towards the modern East, which is also present, I argue, in *Beni Mora*. Before discussing Holst's musical response to what he saw in Algeria, it is necessary to clarify, as much as possible given the dearth of evidence, where he went and what he did there, and then to introduce other influences that shaped the composition of *Beni Mora*.

In his letters, Holst mentions visiting churches, a mosque, a Kasbah [fortress], and the native quarter in Algiers, and indicates his intention to visit the towns of Tunis and Biskra. When in Biskra, if he took in the tourist sites as he did in Algiers, he would have undoubtedly have visited one of the chief attractions of the town, the dance halls where girls, referred to as Ouled Nails (for the desert tribe from which many of them hailed) worked as dancers and prostitutes, ostensibly to earn money for a marriage dowry.<sup>2</sup>

Holst's music sketchbooks from the trip include tunes labeled with the locations Tunis, Gafsa, and Bensart (today called Bizerte) in Tunisia and Biskra in Algeria. The titles that he gave the tunes have never been taken seriously as an indicator of where he actually went, though Imogen provided a facsimile of them in *The Music of Gustav Holst*, along with a short article that described the sketchbook.<sup>3</sup> The incipits of the tunes in their

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<sup>2</sup> This characterization seems to have been a romanticized myth, as one period commentator noted: "Conspicuous in the crowd are the dancing girls of the Ouled Nail tribe dressed in tawdry finery, hung with barbaric jewelry and masses of gold and silver coins, their hair mixed with wool and plastered with grease, their faces tattooed and darkened with khol and henna. These women delight their patrons with their *danses à ventre* in the *Cafes Maures* at night, and later sit— waiting and watching— on little balconies in the street which is assigned to them. Many attempts have been made by French and English writers to shed a halo of romance over these unfortunate beings. The whitewashing of the harlot is a common literary pose. The story that they come to the desert towns to earn their dower and subsequently return to their own tribe and marry may have some foundation; such a procedure is not unknown in other parts of the world; but to judge from the appearance of some of them they are a long time from thinking about settling down." Charles Thomas-Stanford, *About Algeria* (London: John Lane, 1911), 206-7.

<sup>3</sup> She wrote: "He had taken a small manuscript book with him in his pocket when he went to Algeria, and he struggled to write down some of the tunes he heard... The manuscript sketchbook that Holst took to

original order suggest that he visited Biskra, Gafsa, and Tunis, in that order,<sup>4</sup> and this is reinforced by a letter Holst wrote to his wife:

...It rained like the deuce all day and I thought the only thing was to go back and take the night train to Biskra and then if it rained to go to Tunis and then if it rained to go home and then if it rained to stop there! Also there was an incapable military band practicing near the hotel— it ought to have been amusing, but I had six hours of it— during the rain!

To make amends, today has been my greatest day in Africa so far. Although the roads were awful I started early on the bike, and it has been a glorious day and the roads dried quickly and never, never have I seen such mountains. I hope to reach Biskra next week.<sup>5</sup>

According to Michael Short, a year after his trip Holst returned to the themes in his sketchbook to compose an “oriental dance,” which was never performed as such.<sup>6</sup> In 1910, Holst included this oriental dance as the first movement of an *Oriental Suite*, adding a Second Dance and a Finale subtitled “In the Street of Ouled Nails” (again turning to his Algerian sketchbook for material).<sup>7</sup> Composed for large orchestra including two harps, English horn, piccolo, and varied percussion, he changed the name of the suite before its premiere in 1912 to *Beni Mora*, the setting of a popular novel by Robert Hichens called *The Garden of Allah*. Beni Mora is a town on the edge of the Sahara, closely modeled on the Algerian town of Biskra.

The novel concerns the adventures of a middle-aged English woman, Domini, who has come to the desert resigned to spinsterhood after the death of her father, in

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Algeria in 1908 (now in the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh) contains other fragmentary entries that were written after his return to England. (They are scattered on unnumbered pages, sometimes beginning at the opposite end of the book if he happened to be holding it that way up. He was always very careful about the manuscripts that were intended for other people to read, but the first sketches were meant for his own personal use.)” Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 140 and facs. 12-15.

<sup>4</sup> The towns of Gafsa and Bensart are both in the vicinity of Tunis, and the tunes collected with those names may indicate he visited them either enroute between Biskra and Tunis, or as a daytrip. There is also mention of “Badovia” but Holst’s handwriting is unclear and I have not been able to identify this place.

<sup>5</sup> Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> This was composed for an unidentified dancer who was performing in London. Short, *Gustav Holst*, 84.

<sup>7</sup> The location of these themes in the music is notated below in the analysis of the individual movements.

search of meaning and purpose in her life. She meets a curious Russian stranger, Boris Androvsky, and they fall in love. It turns out he is in fact a monk who has abandoned his order and its desert monastery. Domini and Boris marry, but when the truth of his background is exposed, he returns to his monastery, but not before impregnating Domini. She then moves to Beni Mora, content that her lover has regained his faith and she has found meaning in her life through the child.

The manuscript of *Beni Mora* is labeled: “dedicated to Edwin Evans by whom the work was suggested.” This is crossed out and replaced by a treble clef and two E sixteenth notes under which are written E. E. This play on Edwin’s initials is a recurring motif in the first movement.<sup>8</sup> The suite was premiered on 1 May 1912 as part of a concert series sponsored by the British composer, conductor, and music patron Balfour Gardiner, at the Queen’s Hall with the New Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer. With *Beni Mora*, as with many of Holst’s scores, there was a gap between the premiere and publication. It was issued by Goodwin and Tabb in 1921, spurring a fresh round of performances.

The musical content of the suite is so diverse and the form of the movements taken together is so eclectic, that each movement must be considered separately in order to discern any meaning that Holst may have intended the music to carry.

### First Dance

The first dance is based on three themes arranged in a cyclical pattern.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> An earlier version of the first movement, entitled “Eastern Dance,” (probably the same as the “oriental dance” mentioned earlier) can be found in the Edwin Evans Collection at the Westminster Music Library. It is identical to the first movement of *Beni Mora*.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to the work of A. E. F. Dickinson, whose analysis of *Beni Mora* is the foundation of my own. A. E. F. Dickinson, *Holst’s Music*, ed. Alan Gibbs (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 111-116.

**Table 4.a Cyclical thematic pattern of the First Dance, *Beni Mora***

Theme:	A	B	C	B	C
Measures:	1-19	20-34	35-46	47-57	58-69
	A	C	B	(O)	A
	70-86	87-106	107-121	(122-126)	127-137

The three themes are presented as blocks, almost like a string of picture postcards.<sup>10</sup>

Within each of these there is very little thematic or harmonic development. Overall, the piece moves from I-V-I with the thematic units corresponding thus.

**Table 4.b Harmonic structure of the First Dance, *Beni Mora***

Theme:	ABCB	C	A	C	B	A
Key:	E	trans (a)	B	trans	B	E

The pattern and harmonic trajectory of the movement are straightforward, while the themes that animate each section transform with each reiteration, through orchestration, dynamics, and articulation, adding a level of complexity. The B theme is the most harmonically stable motive in the piece, and is also the most rhythmically active of the three.

**Figure 4.1 B theme, First Dance, *Beni Mora*, flute 1, measures 20-3**



The repetitive nature of the C theme gives it a hypnotic character in which forward movement seems to cease, allowing it to act as a moment of stasis between the two other themes.

<sup>10</sup> The (O) section indicates a brief moment when only an ostinato is heard. This will be discussed in depth below.

**Figure 4.2 C theme, First Dance, *Beni Mora*, flute, measures 35-40**



It is paired with a rhythmic ostinato that acts as a bridge between the first occurrences of the B and C themes, and becomes an integral element to all of the other occurrences of C.

**Figure 4.3 Rhythmic ostinato, First Dance, *Beni Mora*, strings, measures 31-4**



The ostinato consists of four beats, which means that in the movement's triple meter, the rhythmic emphasis is constantly shifting, but the repetition of the pattern reinforces the sense of status.

The A theme is the principal musical element of the movement, and is the cause of the formal and thematic disruption which ends the third movement of the suite. It consists of a pitch set centered on E, (E, F, F-sharp, G-sharp, A, B, C, D-sharp), which, along with the characteristic augmented seconds (with the exception of the F-sharp, which appears only once), is a mode common to indigenous music of the Middle East, known as the *hijaz*.<sup>11</sup> The end of the theme is always accompanied by two hammer-stroke chords.

**Figure 4.4 A theme, First Dance, *Beni Mora*, violin 1, measures 1-9**



<sup>11</sup> Whether Holst meant to invoke the use of a Middle Eastern mode, or the pitch set appeared as the result of his using a collected Algerian melody, is not clear. It is curious, though, that the first occurrence of the A section follows the rules for the initial presentation of a mode in a piece of traditional middle Eastern music, principally, that the first notes introduced after the primary tone (in this case E), are below, that is D-sharp, B, C. The monophonic opening of the first dance demonstrates these rules so faithfully that it is difficult to call it coincidence. There are no tunes in Holst's sketchbook similar to this theme, but that does not mean it was not written down elsewhere or simply remembered.

The A theme opens the piece with unison strings in a low range, and is characterized by with sudden forceful crescendos from *pianissimo* to *forte*, and accents on almost every note, giving the theme a menacing quality. After two occurrences of the B and C themes, the A theme returns at measure 70, in the upper tessitura of the strings, without the accents which characterized its initial presentation. The crescendos are maintained but their upper dynamic is no longer specified. The theme is also joined by an almost sensual accompaniment of flutes, clarinets, and harps. The effect of these changes is that the theme loses its menacing connotation in favor of an alluring one.

This leads to an odd lull in the music (at m. 87) when only the C theme ostinato over an A-flat chord is heard. In measure 91, the C theme appears with the first measure of each of its phrases rhythmically lengthened, creating a disorienting effect that perceptually deepens the trance-like state suggested by the ostinato still sounding beneath it (m. 91-106.) The B theme suddenly appears *tutti* and *fortissimo* at measure 107, seeming all the more violent and disruptive amidst the effect of deepened trance and overall relative calm of the preceding music, but, at the same time, helping to right the harmonic misstep to A-flat at measure 87, with a strong appearance of the dominant.

This occurrence of theme B is interrupted at the end by the raucous intrusion of the A theme in the trumpets (m. 115), prompting a violent cadential extension that culminates in the closing hammer strokes of the A theme. The rhythmic ostinato attempts to return only to be halted by the punctuating chords from the A theme. This is followed by one last ethereal statement of the A theme high in the upper strings accompanied by harps, akin to its appearance at measure 70, but the introduction of the brass with a diminished chord in measures 129 and 132 succeeds in reminding listeners of the theme's

menacing presentation at the opening of the work. The gong interrupts the A theme at measure 135, followed by four punctuating chords over a D pedal, and a single E chord in harp, clarinet, English horn, and timpani, which serves as the final cadence.

What sense is to be made of all of this? The A theme has two connotations, alternating between sensual and threatening expression. Sensuality and threat were common stereotypes connected with Western perceptions of the East,<sup>12</sup> which Holst alludes to, indirectly, in his letters from Algeria. On 16 April 1908, the day after he arrived in Algiers, He wrote to his wife a passage quoted earlier, but important to the present argument:

I did one grandly idiotic thing. I carried my bag myself through a crowd of 500 Arab porters through the docks up the steps to the tram. When I left the latter the fun began again. I know now the true meaning of “street Arab” but our English imitation is mild and amateurish. I conceived the deadliest hatred against all Arabs and even now it is only just diminishing.... The busy city is really great fun now that I have had a night’s rest. Beyond Mustapha (aristocratic suburb) the country seems lovely and the village Arab delightful but I shall know more when I have cycled out some distance... but Algiers is a weird mixture of East and West.<sup>13</sup>

There is a tension in this letter between the threat of the street Arab, which Holst remarks as being worse than the popular cliché as a swarthy villain, and the excitement in experiencing the East for the first time. He elaborates on his initial impression three days later:

The chief glory of Algiers is the native quarter. The streets are really flights of steps with dirty shops or houses on either side *and* the “Smell of the East!”... Nothing can give any idea of the sites to be seen at any street corner even in the European quarter. The native dresses are so varied— so are the natives themselves. The real Arab is a blooming aristocrat who hardly deigns to notice

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<sup>12</sup> These stereotypes are often expressed in gendered terms. The Eastern male is seen as threatening and villainous, and the Eastern female as exotic and sensuous. For a brief overview of this complex but important issue see Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 151-172. See also Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*, passim.

<sup>13</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Algiers, 17 April 1908, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.



you. However he usually spits after you have passed! He is comparatively clean and sometimes handsome— always dignified. But there are those who are wild dirty looking blackguards with faces of fiends. And French ladies go up and down the native quarter with their children in perfect safety!<sup>14</sup>

Again one senses Holst's excitement at the exotic otherness of his surroundings, which always includes a threatening element. There are no observations of anything overtly sensual in Holst's letters, but they were written to his wife, and propriety could perhaps be expected. The connection between the first movement and Holst's own experiences in the East are open to speculation. However, on considering the presence of menacing Arabs in his letters and the nature of the music a sense of Holst's feelings of the modern East begins to emerge. It is the Second Dance, probably written at the same time as the Finale and, interestingly, the only movement where the disruptive opening theme of the First Dance does not occur, where Holst may be further exploring the sensual allure of the East.

### Second Dance

The next movement begins in A, which was the arrival key (m. 99) after the striking harmonic shift to A-flat in the first movement, suggesting a conscious compositional linkage. The first three bars introduce a rhythmic ostinato that is closely related to the one used in the first movement.

**Figure 4.5 Rhythmic Ostinato, Second Dance, *Beni Mora*, timpani, measures 1-8**



In the fourth bar, Holst alters the time signature from five to three, sending the five-beat ostinato into a cyclic repetition that allows for differences of rhythmic emphasis, but also

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<sup>14</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Algiers, 20 April 1908, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

creates a mesmerizing quality similar to that found in the C theme and ostinato of the first movement. At the same time, he introduces a lyric solo into the bassoon.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 4.6 A theme, Second Dance, *Beni Mora*, bassoon, measures 4-9**



The movement is shaped into two strophes that are clearly divided at measure 68. Within these strophes, the melody introduced by the bassoon is repeated and elaborated. Table 4.c outlines the strophes and the important events that occur within them.

**Table 4.c Strophic form of the Second Dance, *Beni Mora***

Strophe 1 (mm. 1-68)		
measures	1-13	Theme A (bassoon)
measures	14-26	Theme A repeated
measures	27-44	Theme A transposed up a 5th and extended leading to harmonic instability
measures	45-68	Transposed theme A begun again, but broken off in favor of harmonic meandering culminating in a curious fermata chord (m. 68, F, C, D, E)
Strophe 2 (mm. 69-100)		
measures	69-71	Curious fermata chord, which ended strophe 1 re-orchestrated from high woodwinds, pianissimo, to four horns, fortissimo
measures	72-81	Return to the sound world of the beginning Theme A (bassoons have melody)
measures	82-87	Theme A repeated but final note abbreviated
Coda		
measures	88-100	Devoid of theme A, meandering, break-up of the ostinato

<sup>15</sup> This tune has a faint similarity to the tune Holst notated in his Algerian sketchbook titled “Chanson de Biskra.” See Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, plate 13.

In addition to the main melody, Holst includes a countermelody which when reduced comprises two chords a half step apart (built on C and B) in various inversions, similar to the half-step tension that underlies the A theme of the first movement.

**Figure 4.7 Countermelody, Second Dance, *Beni Mora*, viola, measures 10-11**



The second measure of the countermelody becomes more important when harmonic instability is introduced as at measures 27-68, a passage that returns prominently in its entirety in the coda.

The Second Dance is essentially a lyrical episode between two more turbulent and weighty movements. Holst's cryptic explanation of the movement was that it "was modeled on the lines of a native dance"<sup>16</sup> and that it reproduced "the spirit rather than the letter of Arab music."<sup>17</sup> It is tempting to infer that he means an idealized dance of one of the Ouled Naïls. The fact that Holst titles the suite *Beni Mora*, the fictionalized Biskra in Robert Hichens' novel, *The Garden of Allah*, suggests the legitimacy of this parallel. An early and important scene in the novel is set in a dancing hall of the Ouled Naïls where the dance of a beautiful girl is carefully described occurring in an atmosphere of threat and violence, the echo of which may be heard in Holst's second movement. Whether or not the next scene in the book, where the two Western protagonists find themselves walking through the street where the dancers go to prostitute themselves is also portrayed in the second movement, is a question even more open to speculation. There is also the

<sup>16</sup> Anon., "Beni Mora," *Morning Post*, 19 July 1922.

<sup>17</sup> "Holst's Suite *Beni Mora*: The Composer Explains Its Origins," *Liverpool Post* 1922.

possibility, supported by a letter to Edwin Evans, that Holst encountered the Ouled Naïls personally.<sup>18</sup>

The sensual sound of the music is pervasive, and intensifies as the music continues. There is an increasing breathlessness, beginning at measure 43, as the long phrases of the movement's principal theme begin to shorten. At measure 60, any sense of memorable melody disappears and the music continues to break into smaller and smaller phrases as the music slows and the winds ascend higher and higher. By measure 65, the music consists of two beat phrases of alternating notes that come to rest on a curious fermata chord (D,F,A,C,E). This chord is re-orchestrated in the next measure (m. 69) from the high woodwinds to the middle register of the horns. In contrast to the *pianissimo* of the fermata, which also includes a decrescendo, the subsequent measure is marked *mezzo forte*, and the rhythmic ostinato from the opening reappears. These sudden changes suggest an almost violent event. Is there a sexual implication to the section just described? Perhaps, but there is no hard evidence to suggest any connection with Holst's experiences in Algeria.

After two more iterations of the principal theme, the piece ends on a chord similar to that of measure 69 as the horns again sound a forceful dissonance (F, B-flat, D, G-sharp) at measure 97 over the timpani ostinato. This does resolve to A major four bars later, but only after a decrescendo from *forte* to triple *piano* and the resolution lasts for only an eighth note.

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<sup>18</sup> In 1909, when Holst had written the first movement of *Beni Mora*, he wrote to his friend Edwin Evans of the dance: "It rather suggests to me an Ouled twiddling her tummy!... In this I had you and your tom-tom in my mind also Mohammed Larbi who sang to me in Beni Mora one day." Gustav Holst to Edwin Evans, summer 1909, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

On one level, as stated at the beginning of this section, the second dance is a lyrical episode between two movements of much greater harmonic and thematic complexity. However, the connections made by Holst to the music as modeled on ‘native dance’ suggest there might be a subtext in the music of the dancer as exotic and alluring, reinforcing the Western stereotypes of the sensuous East. Remembering that the Ouled Naïls were both dancers and prostitutes, it is a possibility that the end of the first strophe discussed above could be meant to represent a sexual act, though if it is, it is not clear if it was inspired by literary sources or personal experience.

### Finale: In the Street of the Ouled Naïls

Holst specified a program for the final movement of *Beni Mora*, making it unique amongst his orchestral compositions. The program is explained in notes written by Holst’s close friend, W. G. Whittaker, for a performance in Newcastle in 1912:<sup>19</sup>

The Suite is founded on recollections of Arab music heard in Beni Mora [referring to Biskra] and other parts of Algeria. The “Ouled Naïls” are Bedouin dancing girls. The listener to the Finale may imagine himself in the Desert at night. As he approaches the village, he hears a flute playing a monotonous little tune, and sees a white-robed Arab procession wending its way through the streets. Gradually the music grows clearer, until as it reaches the street of the “Ouled Naïls” the ear is bewildered by the variety of strains which pour from the dancing halls, and the mind instinctively grasps the connection between the scene and the greater chaos of the surrounding desert. On leaving the village the sound quickly dies away into the silence of the night.<sup>20</sup>

Ten years later, a reporter summarized comments Holst made about the movement before a concert in Wales, including a paraphrase of the program above, and the addition of the

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<sup>19</sup> Given that Holst and Whittaker were close friends, it would be difficult to believe that Whittaker would publish a program note for one of Holst’s pieces, which did not have his approval. Their friendship has been documented in a book of letters. See Michael Short, ed., *Gustav Holst, Letters to W. G. Whittaker* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> William G. Whittaker, Program notes to *Beni Mora*, Newcastle Philharmonic, conducted by Edgar Bainton, 24 October 1912.

oft-repeated anecdote about the origins of the tune heard incessantly throughout the movement:<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Gustav Holst has been telling the musical public of Aberystwyth the origin of his “Beni Mora” Suite.... The closing number was suggested by an Arab procession that went on for many hours, during which the same short tune was repeated. Impressions of the “Street of the Ouled Nails” where every little house was making its own attempts at music, dancing to its own tunes, and in its own discordant keys, are also embodied in the number. Mr. Holst added that he heard the same melody on retiring to bed one evening and at intervals during the night, and when he left in the morning, the same little tune was still being played.<sup>22</sup>

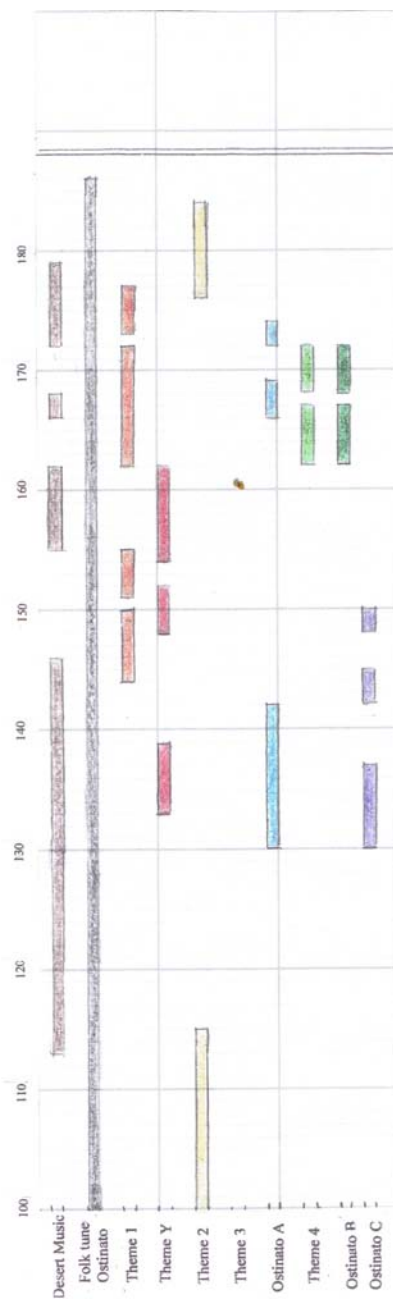
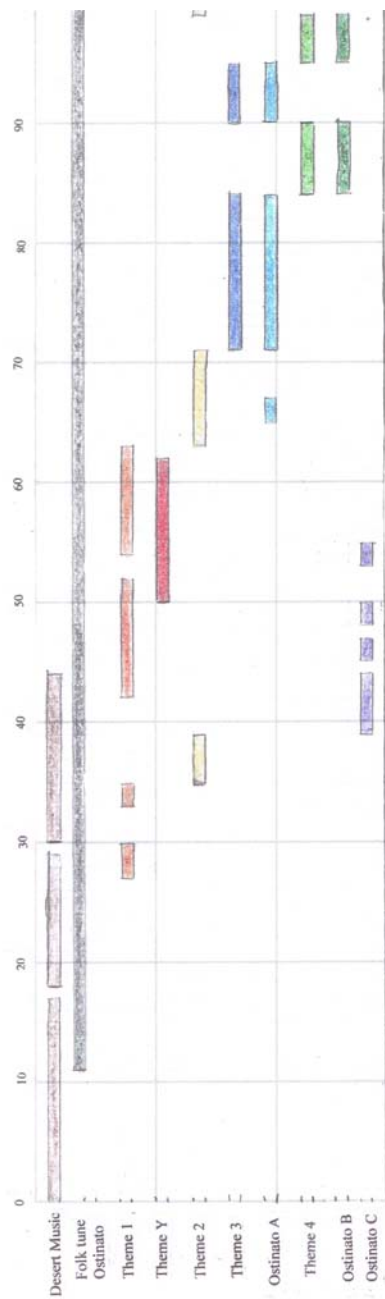
The Finale of *Beni Mora* follows a complicated and idiosyncratic form, and to aid in the following discussion, this chart of thematic occurrences has been included.

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<sup>21</sup> In speaking of *Beni Mora*, Imogen always includes this anecdote, but never the program, writing: “he heard a four-note tune played on a bamboo ‘oboe’ for 2.5 hours on end, and in the third dance in *Beni Mora* this same tune is repeated at an unvaried level of pitch for 163 bars.” Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Anon., “Beni Mora.”

**Table 4.d Thematic chart of the Finale: “In the Street of the Ouled Nails,”  
Beni Mora**



The program outlined by Whittaker does seem to correspond to the music. The movement opens with a passage representing the desolate desert at night, which weakly establishes the tonic of E minor.

**Figure 4.8 Desert music, Finale, *Beni Mora*, strings, measures 1-15**

Adagio

The musical score for Figure 4.8 shows the string parts for measures 1-15. It includes staves for Viola, Double Bass, and Double Bass. The tempo is marked 'Adagio' and the dynamics are 'ppp' and 'legato'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The music consists of sustained chords and moving lines in the lower register.

Over this passage, Holst introduces the folk tune from his sketchbook to which he referred before the concert in Wales, in the flute. The folk tune, an ornamented alternation of e-f# that establishes harmonic tension not resolved until the closing bars,<sup>23</sup> is heard continuously throughout the piece, and is representative of the procession in the program.

**Figure 4.9 Folk-tune ostinato, Finale, *Beni Mora*, flutes, measures 15-8**

Allegro moderato

The musical score for Figure 4.9 shows the flute part for measures 15-8. It is marked 'Allegro moderato' and 'pp sempre'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The music is a continuous, ornamented eighth-note pattern alternating between E and F#.

<sup>23</sup> There is, though, a clever compositional logic underpinning the movement focused on the tension-release between f#, usually harmonized as a diminished seventh chord, and E, harmonized ambiguously in minor but with an added tone (C) implying a deceptive turn to vi. These chords are first introduced in the opening desert music by the violas and basses. Their relationship is further complicated by the introduction of the folk tune ostinato which, when taken alone, seems simply an elaboration of a long f# rather than a manifestation of the movement's e minor tonality. This whole step tension, here manifest as e and f# is a trait that is found in all three movements in the suite, but receives its most ingenious working out in this movement.

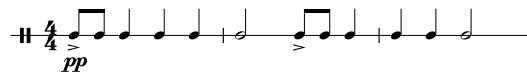


As the procession begins to enter the city, fragments of three themes are introduced (themes 1/2/Y) which are elaborated as the procession nears the street of the Ouled Nails. These tunes are derived from Holst's sketches of Algerian folksong,<sup>24</sup> as well as from the first theme of the opening movement. In addition, Holst introduces two ostinatos in the percussion. This section seems to capture a growing sense of excitement as the procession wends its way toward the street of the Ouled Nails.

**Figure 4.10 Theme 1, Finale, *Beni Mora*, oboe, measures 42-51**



**Figure 4.11 Ostinato A, Finale, *Beni Mora*, bass drum, measures 39-40**



**Figure 4.12 Theme Y (initial theme of the first movement), Finale, *Beni Mora*, violin, measures 50-7**



**Figure 4.13 Theme 2, Finale, *Beni Mora*, piccolo, measures 35-8**



At measure 71, the texture, key, and mood change abruptly, corresponding to the arrival in the street of the Ouled Nails. The effect is akin to suddenly walking out of a quiet alley into a bustling street. Here Holst introduces two new themes (3 and 4) and

<sup>24</sup> Theme 1 is related to his sketch entitled "Bensart," theme 3 is related to "Tunise," and Theme 4 to "Chanson de Gafsa- Arabe." Theme 2 may also be derived from "Bensart." See Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, plates 12-15.

pairs ostinato B with theme 3 while introducing yet another percussion ostinato (ostinato C) to accompany occurrences of theme 4.

**Figure 4.14 Theme 3/Ostinato B, Finale, *Beni Mora*, violin and tambourine, measures 71-83**

The musical score for Figure 4.14 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the violin, written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The bottom staff is for the tambourine, written in a simplified notation with a double bar line and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of a continuous, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked with a dynamic of *mf* (mezzo-forte).

**Figure 4.15 Theme 4/Ostinato C, Finale, *Beni Mora*, trumpet and bass drum, measures 84-9**

The musical score for Figure 4.15 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the trumpet, written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The bottom staff is for the bass drum, written in a simplified notation with a double bar line and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of a continuous, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked with a dynamic of *p* (piano).

These ostinato/tune pairings appear in alternation, adding to the growing sense of excitement until measure 99 when a menacing reappearance of theme 2 (in the trumpet, marked “coarsely”) interrupts, ushering in fragments of the desert music and thwarting the celebratory mood. At measure 113 the desert music returns, *forte*, in the brass, with the length of the notes quadrupled, and grinds furiously against the unceasing folk tune ostinato, *forte* in the winds and strings. In terms of Holst’s program, this combination can be understood to represent the growing realization of the connection between the desert and of the human activity being observed. The tension in the music, underpinned by the unresolved tonal ambiguity of E and F-sharp, grows until measure 130 where all voices except the horns and a trumpet are playing the desert music, to the accompaniment of ostinatos B and C, triple *forte* in the percussion. This is the moment of enlightenment in

the program, when the protagonist has a revelation about both the desert and its peoples: both are chaos.

The subsequent music (beginning at m. 138) revisits fragments of themes as it loses energy and focus (as in the end of the preceding two movements). This is described in the program as “On leaving the village the sound quickly dies away into the silence of the night.”<sup>25</sup> The program seems the weakest here because it does not account for the speed and completeness with which the music seems to break down after the terrible realization.

It is unclear when *Beni Mora* was named after Robert Hichens's novel *The Garden of Allah*, but there are intriguing resonances between the book and Holst's finale that might even reflect Holst's own experiences in Biskra, despite the lack of evidence to that effect. In chapter 5, Domini goes to the famous garden of Count Anteoni, a mysterious Sicilian noble who lives in Beni Mora. Hichens takes pains to describe the sound of a flute being played by a gardener:

Never before had she heard any music that seemed to mean and suggest so much to her as this African tune played by an enamoured gardener. Queer and uncouth as it was, distorted with ornaments and tricked out with abrupt runs, exquisitely unnecessary grace notes, and sudden twitterings prolonged till a strange and frivolous Eternity tripped in to banish Time, it grasped Domini's fancy and laid a spell upon her imagination.... Again and again it repeated the same queer little melody, changing the ornamentation at the fantasy of the player.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of a monotonous flute tune is clearly related to the repeating ostinato found in Holst's music, but so is the placement of the tune as a background to a larger realization, a musical one in this case. Periodically during Domini's lengthy visit to the garden, Hichens references the flute player to remind us he is still playing.

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<sup>25</sup> William G. Whittaker, “*Beni Mora*.”

<sup>26</sup> Robert Hichens, *The Garden of Allah* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1904), 60.

Later, Hichens describes Domini's visit to one of the dance clubs of the Ouled Naïls, focusing especially on the music accompanying the dancers:

The hautboy players blew a terrific blast, and then, swelling the note, till it seemed as if they must burst both themselves and their instruments, swung into a tremendous and magnificent tune, a tune tingling with barbarity, yet such as a European could have sung or written down... it made the eyes shine and the blood leap, and the spirit rise up and clamour within the body, clamour for utter liberty, for action, for wide fields in which to roam, for long days and nights of glory and of love, for intense hours of emotion and of life lived with exultant desperation. The tom-toms accompanied it with an irregular but rhythmical roar.<sup>27</sup>

In Holst's program, the fragmentary and chaotic onslaught of the tunes inspires a revelation. For Domini, the music and dancing arouses a vision of a procession that prophesies her fate:

It seemed to her suddenly that she understood more clearly than hitherto in what lay the intense, the over-mastering and hypnotic attraction exercised already by the desert over her nature. In the desert there must be, there was— she felt it— not only light to warm the body, but light to illuminate the dark places of the soul.... She chose Beni-Mora as the place to which she would go in search of recovery, of self-knowledge. It had been preordained.... She looked round at the Arabs. She was as much of a fatalist as any one of them.<sup>28</sup>

Is it going too far to suggest that like Domini, Holst came to Algeria in search of recovery, of self-knowledge, but unlike her, his realization, as the music implies, was of the frightening "otherness" and menace of his surroundings? Could such a reading account for the unfocused and enigmatic ending?

Holst's program does not elucidate one thematic element that is central to the moment of realization in the program. He brings back the initial theme of the first movement (here called theme Y to avoid confusion) three times in the finale, (mm. 50-62, mm. 133-138, and mm. 148-162) and each time it becomes more disruptive. This theme's return contributes to large-scale coherence between movements, but its transfer

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 115-16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 117-18.

from a programmatically nondescript movement to a programmatic movement without comment, and its disruptive function in the finale suggests a greater importance.

Its initial appearance is intermingled with the first complete occurrence of theme 1, and ushers in the coarser theme 2 (mm. 50-63). The implications of Y's manifestation at this moment are unclear, as, immediately after, the music abruptly changes upon entering the street of the Ouled Nails at measure 71. The second occurrence of the Y theme is directly after the climax of the movement at measure 134 when the observer realizes the connection between the chaos of the desert and of the street scene around him. The desert music and folk tune are paired with ostinatos B and C with a full orchestral texture at *triple forte*. Out of this calamitous juxtaposition a trumpet enters, hidden in the texture (m. 133). Over three bars, it bursts forth into a *triple forte* dynamic, forcefully declaiming the Y theme, only to recede immediately back into a significantly weakened texture that does not regain its previous volume and intensity. The trumpet explosion signals the beginning of the slow disintegration that characterizes the rest of the movement. The Y theme reappears a few bars later in alternation with a shortened reference to the first appearance of theme 1, after which the Y theme begins again, in tandem with the desert music (m. 154), growing in volume and texture until it erupts in the violins at measure 159. This truncates the desert music, and ushers in fragmentary returns to themes one, two, and four and ostinatos A and B against the ever-present folk tune ostinato.

Why does the Y theme, which seems to intrude upon Holst's program, imply some domination of the mind of the protagonist, and why does it always appear complete as the other themes fragment, possibly suggesting the frustration of the protagonist's

attempts to focus his attention? What so powerfully demands the awareness of the listener? In our present state of knowledge, we cannot know.

Holst's program implies a specific meaning for the music that imparts not only a narrative but also an ideology to the music. Regarding ideology, Said writes that Imperialism is:

supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century Imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like "inferior" or "subject races," "subordinate peoples," "dependency," "expansion," and "authority." Out of the Imperial experiences, notions about culture were clarified, reinforced, criticized, or rejected.<sup>29</sup>

Holst's view of the East is one that had been fashioned to some extent from direct experience, but also out of interactions in Cheltenham with retired civil servants and military men, and books such as R. W. Frazier's *Silent Gods and Sun-Steeped Lands*, and Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.

The title of *Beni Mora* connects not only with Algeria but also with the fictional world of *The Garden of Allah*, which portrays the indigenous people of the East as an inferior "other," as in this exchange, as the two main characters observe colonial authorities breaking up an Arab riot:

"What people!" she said. "What wild creatures!"  
She laughed again. The patrol pushed its way roughly in at the doorway.  
"The Arabs are always like that, Madame."<sup>30</sup>

Hichens' novel had an Imperial impact on Biskra, the Beni Mora of real life, transforming the city to match the expectations of tourists who came in search of scenes from the novel, as can be gleaned from this account from 1911:

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<sup>29</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Hichens, *The Garden of Allah*, 122.

Biskra of the tourists, *urbs circumcurrentium*, is in a fair way to rechristen itself Hichenstown. The novelist and his not very edifying story pervade the place; they are thrust at you everywhere with damnable iteration. And the worst of it is that however mawkish the book it has undeniable power, and if you are unfortunate enough to have read it you will be unable to avoid recognizing at every turn the scenes in which the much-longing-to-be-loved heroine and her uncouth lover played their parts. You will probably not have been in the town many hours, perhaps not many minutes, before a guide will accost you and produce with much dignity a visiting card of Mr. Hichens, on which something is written. If you express neither interest nor emotion he will regard you with a mixture of incredulity and pity. What are you here for but to worship at the shrine of the *marabout* [foreigner] Hichens? Hichens has made— or marred— Biskra, and Biskra is not unmindful.<sup>31</sup>

Like Hichens' *The Garden of Allah*, Holst's program for the third movement references Imperial vocabulary and attitudes in its equating of the Street of the Ouled Naïls with the chaos of the desert. The East is portrayed as a place of exotic and sensual delights, but always with a subtext of barbarism and violence that occasionally subsumes all else.

Holst's letters convey the same duality. He is fascinated and excited by the native quarter of Algiers with its "Eastern smell" and "the sites to be seen at any street corner." At the same time, he acknowledges the inferiority of the Arabs he sees by Western standards: "He is comparatively clean and sometimes handsome," while at the same time striking a note of threat observing that some Arabs are "wild dirty looking blackguards with faces of fiends."<sup>32</sup> Holst's own view of the modern East is Imperial; and his music conveys a similar view. As he did with *King Estmere*, Holst was contributing to the Imperial culture of Great Britain. As Edward Said notes:

For citizens of nineteenth-century Britain and France, empire was a major topic of unembarrassed cultural attention. British India and French North Africa alone played inestimable roles in the imagination, economy, political life, and social fabric of British and French society, and if we mention names like Delacroix, Edmund Burke, Ruskin, Carlyle, James and John Stuart Mill, Kipling, Balzac, Nerval, Flaubert, or Conrad, we shall be mapping a tiny corner of a far vaster

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas-Stanford, *About Algeria*, 209-10.

<sup>32</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, Algiers, 20 April 1908, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.

reality than even their immense collective talents cover. There were scholars, administrators, travellers, traders, visionaries, poets, and every variety of outcast and misfit in the outlying possessions of these two Imperial powers, each of whom contributed to the formation of a colonial actuality existing at the heart of metropolitan life.<sup>33</sup>

Questioning the circumstances surrounding the composition of *Beni Mora* also uncovers the ambiguity of Holst's biography regarding the Algerian journey. The music and circumstances of *Beni Mora* raise many questions as to why Holst went to Algeria, what he did, and how these experiences were translated into music.<sup>34</sup> With the amount of information available today, most of these questions can only be answered with measured guesses. Understanding how Holst's music participates and furthers Imperial prejudices and beliefs gives listeners a better understanding of the piece's origin and meaning, and more importantly, helps to locate Holst in British culture of the day as a person with Imperial beliefs regarding the modern East.

This is not to deride Holst's achievements in *Beni Mora*, but rather to show how the piece reinforces a certain view of the modern East, one, incidentally, that is at odds with his view of the ancient East, which is treated with such seriousness and reverence in his Sanskrit works. Holst marked this divide in 1909 in the letter to Edwin Evans quoted earlier, when he writes that the first movement of *Beni Mora* represents his "first attempt at being oriental," this after *Sita* (1906), the first group of *Rig Veda Hymns* (1908), and *Sāvitri* (1908) were already written.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps his trip to Algeria had a larger impact on his artistic life than has hitherto been suggested. It is interesting to note that *Beni Mora* comes as one of the last in a long

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<sup>33</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Imogen Holst published an essay about her father's Algerian sojourn, which offers little in the way of clarification, focusing instead on the shock Holst must have felt, and the uses of the tunes he collected in later music. Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 139-40.

<sup>35</sup> Gustav Holst to Edwin Evans, summer 1909, Holst Letters, Holst Foundation, without shelf number.



line of pieces ostensibly connected to the East in some way. Could it be that the East that Holst encountered was not completely in keeping with his romanticized view gleaned from books like *The Garden of Allah*? Could that enigmatic Y theme in fact represent Holst's own shock at the reality of Eastern culture and life experienced while in Algeria? When Holst returned to the East, in World War I, his comments about the indigenous peoples were harsh.<sup>36</sup> *Beni Mora* clarifies Holst's own view of the relationship between the modern East and West demonstrating his belief in the superiority of Western civilization— a sense of superiority that was an important element of the British Imperial culture to which Holst contributed through his music.<sup>37</sup>

Before departing from consideration of *Beni Mora* and the role of Imperialism in Holst's music, it is important to note that certain compositional elements in this work, such as the pervasive use of ostinati, eclectic formal patterns, and the ability to reinterpret the connotation of a theme through reorchestration, are devices of Holst's maturity. Issues of compositional development will be taken up more in depth in the following chapters through a consideration of the role of Wagnerism's influence in his composition of operas, completed, composed, or conceived around the time of Holst's Algerian sojourn.

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<sup>36</sup> Gustav Holst to Isobel Holst, 11-12 Nov. 1918, 10 Feb 1919, 12 March 1919, 26 March 1919, 18 April 1919, Holst Foundation, without shelf numbers. These are excerpted in chapter 2.

<sup>37</sup> There is much disagreement over the source of this British superiority, be it racially motivated, an issue of class, or, more likely, some combination of the two. See Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; Said, *Orientalism*. on race, and Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: Or How the British Saw Their Empire*. Further explorations of British Imperial culture can be found in Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire*. and Judith M. Brown, and WM. Roger Louis, ed., *The Twentieth Century, The Oxford History of the British Empire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999).

## Chapter V

### “Good old Wagnerian Bawling:” The Re-evaluation of Holst’s Emulation of Wagner in *Sita*

Holst’s first contact with Richard Wagner’s music probably came when he traveled from Cheltenham at the age of 18 to hear Gustav Mahler conduct *Die Götterdämmerung* at Covent Garden. Though Holst never commented on this, Holst scholar Michael Short offers the opinion that the performance had a profound effect:

Holst was stunned, partly by the scale of the drama, but principally by the passionate expression of the music, which amazed him by its technical audacity. The young country organist returned to Cheltenham dazed and confused, his musical values having been seriously shaken by this overwhelming experience.<sup>1</sup>

At the Royal College of Music (RCM), Holst befriended a fellow student, Fritz Hart, who wrote that Holst came to London as an opponent of Wagner, but on hearing *Tristan und Isolde* and conversing with Hart, a fervent Wagnerite, his opinion changed.<sup>2</sup> Attendance at Covent Garden and other performance venues no doubt aided Holst’s conversion.<sup>3</sup> A group of friends (including the composers Thomas Dunhill, Samuel

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<sup>1</sup> Short, *Gustav Holst*, 17. Holst himself left no known account of this event, so it is likely that Short is elaborating on the account offered by Imogen. See Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> See Fritz B. Hart, “Early Memories of Gustav Holst” *The Royal College of Music Magazine* 1 39, no. 2, 1943): 43-52; Fritz B. Hart, “Early Memories of Gustav Holst II,” *The Royal College of Music Magazine* 39, no. 3, 1943): 84-89. Hart also recounts Holst’s early development as an opera composer, through which he learned the value of proper orchestration, the practical difficulties in mounting an opera, and the value of a good librettist.

<sup>3</sup> In 1893, he attended a season of Wagner operas at Covent Garden. See Short, *Gustav Holst*, 23. If *The Meister*, the journal of the London Wagner Society, is any indication, Wagner’s compositions appeared often in London opera houses and concert halls. In addition to the Wagner season in 1893 conducted by Mahler, which included *The Ring*, and *Tristan und Isolde*, William Ashton Ellis reviews a concert of Wagner excerpts at the St. James Hall conducted by Hans Richter. In 1894, there is mention of a grand Wagner concert conducted by Felix Mottl on 17 April in the New Queen’s Hall, and an announcement of a

Coleridge-Taylor, John Ireland, Evelyn Howard-Jones, Hart, and Holst) would congregate at Wilkin's Tea Room in Kensington and discuss all manner of topics, including Wagner.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to believe that the journal of the London Wagner Society, *The Meister*, or the newly published translations of Wagner's prose works by William Ashton Ellis were unknown to this group, and thus to Holst.<sup>5</sup>

Imogen makes clear that her father's fascination with Wagner was so intense that he was not able to control its effects on his music:

*Tristan* had transformed his whole existence and for the next ten years he was held by the binding tyranny of its spell.... Wagner's music was continually with him, swirling round and round in his brain and shuddering through every nerve of his body. He not only dreamed Wagner, he moved Wagner, he ate and drank Wagner and took in huge draughts of Wagner with every gasp of air he breathed along the Prince Consort Road.... In his orchestral works he let his passion have its way with him: every change of harmony had to be chromatic, every motif had to be dealt with in sequence. Even if he had been powerful enough to prevent it, he would have been unwilling to interfere with the persistent way in which a secondary seventh lurked round every emotional corner.<sup>6</sup>

Following this lead, discussion of Wagnerian influence on Holst has been confined to clichés of his inability to control the influence of Wagner on his music, and of the negative impact of Wagnerian chromaticism on Holst's development, yet his own comments make clear that Holst felt Wagner could help his development. He wrote to Vaughan Williams in 1903:

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short season of Wagner opera at Drury Lane Theatre to include *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Tristan und Isolde*. There is also a review of an October 1894 concert conducted by Wagner's son Siegfried consisting of music of his grandfather (Franz Liszt) and his father. In 1895, Ellis mentions a return of Siegfried Wagner to conduct in the Queen's Hall in on 6 June, and announces a production of *Tannhäuser* at Covent Garden.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*, 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> The journal was published from 1888 until the society's disbandment in 1895. The society's end was largely brought about by internal struggles caused by Ellis's vociferous attacks on a biography of Wagner by Ferdinand Praeger. See Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978), 44. and William Ashton Ellis, *Wagner Sketches: 1849 a Vindication* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trèubner & co., 1892); Ferdinand Praeger, *Wagner as I Knew Him* (London: Longmans & Co., 1892).

<sup>6</sup> Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 4-5.

As to opera, I am quite bewildered. *Die Feuersnot* is in reality quite simple and unoriginal *as opera*. Charpentier's *Louise* is idiotic as opera. And I do feel sometimes inclined to chuck *Sita* in case it is only bad Richard I [Wagner]. Unless one ought to follow the latter until he leads you to fresh things. What I feel is that there is *nothing* else but Wagner excepting Italian one-act horrors.<sup>7</sup>

In her final work about her father, Imogen acknowledges Holst's hope that Wagner could be helpful to his compositional development. She wrote, in a series of essays appended onto the third edition of *The Music of Gustav Holst*, entitled "Holst's Music Reconsidered:"

I always used to think that he [Holst] had struggled year after year to *escape* from Wagner. The idea of following Wagner's music and then allowing himself to be led by it to other things is much more revealing.<sup>8</sup>

On the same page, however, she is still trying to identify the moment when Holst banished Wagnerian influence from his music. She wrote of his early stage work, *The Youth's Choice* (1902):

The characters in the opera stand about while the orchestra indulges in chromatic sequences to such an extent that it would have been impossible for Holst to follow Wagner any further: there was no further to go. This was the turning point, and during the next few years, he was led to fresh things.<sup>9</sup>

The influence of Wagner on Holst was drawn out over many years and many works, and there is no evidence that Holst ever decided, in a given moment, to turn his back on Wagner. Three operas, *Sita*, *Sāvitri*, and *The Perfect Fool*, all connected by the events of 1906-1908, (when *Sita* lost the Ricordi prize, spurring Holst's trip to Algeria, immediately after which he began to write *Sāvitri*, and sketched some part of the scenario for *The Perfect Fool*) show how Holst worked through the influence of Wagner. In *Sita* he emulated Wagner in music and libretto, though in the final act he began to depart from

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<sup>7</sup> Vaughan Williams and Holst, *Heirs and Rebels: Letters Written to Each Other and Occasional Writings on Music*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 134.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Wagnerian practices. In *Sāvitrī*, Wagnerian elements are still present, and occasionally dominate, but Holst has largely subsumed or discarded externally Wagnerian techniques with his growing confidence in his own compositional voice. Many years later Holst would mock what he once revered, parodying Wagner in the truly individualistic *The Perfect Fool*.

### *Sita*

The culture of *fin-de-siècle* British Wagnerism provides the context for Holst's contact and understanding of Wagner and his music. Wagnerism was significant in *fin-de-siècle* London, as evidenced by its influence on myriad individuals from diverse cultural, artistic, and political movements. The socialist George Bernard Shaw saw Wagner's *Ring* as an allegory of the evils of modern capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Decadents like Arthur Symons, Oscar Wilde, and Aubrey Beardsley, were attracted to the eroticism of Wagner's works,<sup>11</sup> while members of the Irish Literary Revival, George Moore especially, were fascinated by the fusion of words and music in Wagner's theories of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>12</sup>

Despite attacks on Wagner and his music by the essayist Max Nordau and others,<sup>13</sup> and hostility to Wagnerian influence in British compositional circles,<sup>14</sup> the

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<sup>10</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Ring of the Nibelungs*, 1st ed. (New York: Brentanos, 1909).

<sup>11</sup> See Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> William Butler Yeats and Moore wrote a play inspired by Wagner's works entitled *Diarmuid and Grania* that was performed once, and neither author liked. Yeats was also drawn to the national element in Wagner's works in his own attempts to create a national theatre for Ireland. See Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, 130.

<sup>13</sup> In 1895, the essayist Max Nordau attacked Wagner and his influence on fashionable London culture in his book *Degeneration*, claiming that modern art was a gauge of the physical and mental decline of the human race and famously referring to Wagner as "the last mushroom on the dunghill of Romanticism," Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 2nd ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1895), 194. He also attacked much other contemporary art, including Oscar Wilde and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for transgressing social mores

propagation and discussion of Wagner's works flourished in London in the 1890s and 1900s, aided by the creation of the London branch of the Universal Wagner Society in 1884.<sup>15</sup> This group helped fund the Bayreuth Festival, visits from Wagner's son Siegfried, and the translation of Wagner's complete prose works by William Ashton Ellis, which were partially serialized in *The Meister*.<sup>16</sup> The journal also included articles on Schopenhauer's philosophy, translations of Wagner's letters, dramatic, biographical, and philosophical analyses of his works, and original poetry and prose on Wagnerian themes. Ellis also reviewed or announced performances of Wagner's operas and symphonic music.

Holst contributed to the Wagnerian milieu of *fin-de-siècle* Britain in *Sita*, a work that remains unpublished and unperformed, and has arguably suffered the greatest

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and good taste, arguing that such art reflected what he called "the nervous condition" of modernity. Shaw answered Nordau in a solicited letter to the American socialist newspaper, *Liberty*. Thirteen years later Shaw would print a pamphlet based on this letter entitled *The Sanity of Art*. See George Bernard Shaw, "A Degenerate's View of Nordau," *Liberty*, 27 July (1895); George Bernard Shaw, *The Sanity of Art: An Exposure of the Current Nonsense About Artists Being Degenerate* (London: The New Age Press, 1908). For discussion of other negative reactions to Wagner and his influence on English culture see Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Byron Adams and Aidan Thomson have explored the hostility to Wagnerian influence on British composers in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Adams writes: "Aidan Thomson has noted that the reactionary writer Charles Maclean castigated Elgar and other English composers who succumbed to 'Wagnerian temptations.' Thomson observes that 'the implication is that English composers who wrote in an unlyrical, Wagnerian manner were somehow unpatriotic, or given [Maclean's] reference to temptation, immoral.'" See Byron Adams, "Elgar's Late Oratorios: Roman Catholicism, Decadence and the Wagnerian Dialectic of Shame and Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Daniel Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 86., Aidan Thomson, "Re-Reading Elgar: Hermeneutics, Criticism and Reception in England and Germany, 1900-1914" (dissertation, Oxford University, 2003), 60. For a further discussion of Wagner's influence on Elgar see McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios: The Creation of an Epic Narrative*.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the Wagner Society that preceded it, and of the membership see Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to his services to British Wagnerism, Ellis was also a prominent member of the London Theosophical Lodge, published articles in Theosophical Journals, and traveled, for a time, in social circles including the founder of Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky. See David Cormack, "Faithful, All Too Faithful: A Study of William Ashton Ellis," *Wagner* 14, no. 2, 1993); David Cormack, "William Ashton Ellis: Completing the Picture," *Wagner* 15, no. 2, 1994).

misunderstanding from Imogen's characterization of Holst's worship of Wagner.<sup>17</sup> *Sita* reflects Holst's emulation of Wagner to some degree in matters of narrative and technique, but also Holst's strong beliefs in socialism. These seemingly disparate elements can be linked through Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*. This book portrays Wagner and his works as socialist, and could have provided Holst the suggestion that Wagnerian music drama would be the best vehicle for his own socialist opera. *Sita* follows Wagner's belief that the drama should focus on emotion, but in place of passionate and familial love, preeminent in Wagner's works, Holst substitutes comradeship, the living and working for the good of all, a strongly socialist emotion and one that Shaw reads into Wagner's own works in *The Perfect Wagnerite*. Investigating *Sita* not only sheds light on Holst's most ambitious yet unperformed score; it also tells us much about how Wagnerian London shaped his view of Wagner and his music, which helped him towards developing a unique compositional voice.

Any analysis of Wagnerian elements and socialist message in *Sita* must begin with a consideration of the origin of the libretto and a detailed synopsis of the story, correcting mistakes found in other studies of the work. Holst wrote his own libretto, basing it on a section of the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*,<sup>18</sup> a story variously analogous to Homer's *Iliad*.<sup>19</sup> The choice demonstrates Holst's growing interest in Sanskrit texts and Hinduism, informed, as discussed above in chapter 2, by his

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<sup>17</sup> An edited and abridged excerpt of Act III of *Sita* was recorded by Leslie Head and the Opera Viva Orchestra in 1983 (Opera Viva recordings 101-2), and an edited version of the *Interlude* from Act III was included in a Lyrita Recording of the London Philharmonic conducted by David Atherton (Lyrita SRCD.209).

<sup>18</sup> The manuscript score of *Sita* bears the words "founded on the ancient Hindoo epic "The Ramayana."

<sup>19</sup> See Gregory D. Alles, *The Iliad, the Ramayana, and the Work of Religion: Failed Persuasion and Religious Mystification* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Vijaya Guttal, *The Iliad and the Ramayana: A Comparative Study* (Varanasi: Ganga Kaveri Pub. House, 1994). The perceived connections between ancient Greek and ancient Sanskrit texts may have been one of the reasons that Holst's Sanskrit works led to a period where he set ancient Greek texts.

involvement with Theosophy, but also, perhaps, by connections between Wagnerism and Theosophy in London.<sup>20</sup> There has been much disagreement over Holst's ability to read and translate Sanskrit in the late 1890s, but Raymond Head has argued convincingly that Holst had neither the funds nor the time to learn Sanskrit at this time;<sup>21</sup> therefore, the libretto of *Sita* is most likely the result of his work with translations.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 5.a The characters of *Sita* as listed by Holst in his manuscript score**

Rama	(incarnation of Vishnu)	Baritone
Lakshman	(His brother)	Tenor
Ràvana	(King of the Rakshas, Lord of Lanka)	Bass
Maritcha	(A Raksha Chief)	Baritone
The Earth		Mezzo-soprano
Surpanakhà	(Sister of Ràvana)	Mezzo-soprano
Sita	(The daughter of the Earth)	Soprano
Chorus of Rakshas		Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass
Chorus of Mortals		Tenor and Bass
Hidden Chorus of the Voices of the Earth		Soprano and Alto

<sup>20</sup> During his involvement in the Wagner Society, Ellis was also a member of the Theosophical Society and, being a trained physician, medically treated its founder, Madame Blavatsky. He also wrote for Theosophical journals and presented papers about Wagner to Theosophical organizations. See William Ashton Ellis, *Richard Wagner, as Poet, Musician and Mystic* (London: Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts, 1887); William Ashton Ellis, "Wagner as Poet," *Transactions of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society*, no. 11, August (1886). He also wrote articles on topics other than Wagner for Madame Blavatsky's journal, *Lucifer*.

<sup>21</sup> See Head, "Holst and India I," 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> Head rightly points out that Ralph Griffiths' *Idylls from the Sanskrit, Specimens of Old Indian Poetry* and his translations of the *Rig Veda* contain versions of all the Sanskrit texts Holst set to music (Ibid.: 4.). *Idylls from the Sanskrit* contains a condensed metrical version of the Sita-Rama story, as well as a version of the Sāvitrī story. There exists, though, a reply to Holst's letter to the Sanskrit scholar and translator, Romesh C. Dutt, asking Dutt to read his libretto and comment on it. Dutt's condensed metrical translation of the *Ramayana* appeared in 1899, around the time Holst's libretto was begun. Running to 154 pages, it could have presented a more approachable and affordable version of *The Ramayana* than Griffiths' five volume complete edition. The Rama-Sita story is also printed in Ralph Griffith, *Scenes from the Ramayan* (London: Trübner and Co., 1868). For versions of the *Ramayana* see Ralph Griffith and Narayana Hemchandra, *The Light of India; or, Sita*. (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Gazette Press, 1895); Vålmaiki and Romesh Chunder Dutt, *Ramayana, the Epic of Rama, Prince of India* (London: J. M. Dent, 1899).



The opera commences akin to Wagner's *Die Götterdämmerung* with a short orchestral prelude that runs without break into the Prologue, where the Earth Goddess appeals to the god Vishnu to be her champion and defeat the evil Ràvana, King of Lanka, victor over the thunder god Indra, and Lord of the Rakshas, a devious race of magic shape shifters.<sup>23</sup> Ràvana reigns by terror, and has grown so powerful that not even the gods may defeat him. Vishnu grants the Earth Goddess' wish, incarnating into an avatar called Rama, who is unaware that he carries the Vishnu godhead.

The first act opens with Rama and his brother Lakshman engaged in battle with a band of Rakshas. Lakshman is knocked unconscious, and after the Rakshas are defeated, Rama believes his brother is dead. He calls on the Earth Goddess to provide him with "a comrade." She responds, sending her daughter Sita, who rises from the earth. After a brief digression on the virtues of love, Rama and Sita express their devotion to each other. Sita then warns Rama that she, like her mother, may only reside where there is trust. He can never question her loyalty. They rejoice after discovering Lakshman alive, and the three celebrate the joys of comradeship. As they begin to travel home to the valley of Pavachati, they are accosted by the sister of Ràvana, Surpanakhà, who, attracted by the power Rama has shown in battles with Rakshas, proclaims her love for him. On learning that he has chosen a bride, she attacks Sita. Surpanakhà is repelled and mocked by Lakshman, and she vows the vengeance of her brother on them. Sita, Rama, and Lakshman travel on. Surpanakhà calls on her brother, lying to him that Rama and Lakshman attacked and insulted her. She demands revenge, and Ràvana refuses, but the

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<sup>23</sup> In Hindu mythology, Rakshas were evil humans in previous incarnations. Holst's libretto gives no indication of the appearance of the Rakshas, though their supernatural powers are demonstrated by their ability to fly in the first scene of Act I, and their ability in Act II to shape shift.

wily Surpanakhà then tells him of Sita and her beauty. Overcome with lust, Ràvana resolves that he must have her, and vows to make her his queen at any cost.

The second act opens at a Raksha camp. The Raksha chief Maritcha recounts the story of Ràvana's defeat of Indra, the god of thunder, which brought him power over the gods. Ràvana appears, to much supplication and fear from his subjects. When he demands that they attack Rama, though, they show their cowardice by refusing.

Disgusted by this, Ràvana devises a plan to win Sita by wile rather than force. A Raksha disguised as a fawn will lure Rama away; another will impersonate the voice of Rama in peril, drawing Lakshman away, leaving Sita alone. When the Rakshas enact this plan, Lakshman refuses to leave Sita, as he had sworn an oath to Rama to this effect. Sita accuses Lakshman of a conspiracy to kill Rama and have her for himself. Disgusted at this slight, Lakshman leaves in search of Rama. Ràvana appears disguised as a pilgrim, and Sita welcomes him. He reveals his identity and demands Sita accompany him to his kingdom and become his queen. She refuses, and he carries her off by force in his winged chariot.

The final act opens with Rama on the opposite bank of the river from Lanka, Ràvana's citadel. He recounts the events that have transpired between Acts II and III, including Sita's disappearance, and the help of the Earth Goddess in leading him here. Surpanakhà appears, and tells him that Sita is beyond the river in the city of Lanka. She sows doubt in Rama's mind, telling him that Sita is now enthroned as a queen of the Rakshas and no longer loves him. He refuses to believe her, saying that when he finds Sita she will be in the rags of a prisoner. As Lakshman and a band of men approach, Surpanakhà devises a plan to win Rama if he is able to cross the torrent and defeat

Ràvana. She will dress Sita in the clothes of a Raksha queen, deceiving Rama into believing that she willingly became Ràvana's bride. Rama, Lakshman, and the men begin to construct a mighty bridge over the torrent.

Scene two is set in Lanka, where Surpanakhà tricks Sita into dressing in the jewels and robes of a Raksha queen, telling her that Rama is coming, and that she must prepare to welcome him. Ràvana hears the bridge building, and summons his armies. Sita appears on a balcony arrayed in jewels, with the seal of the Rakshas affixed to her forehead. Ràvana brings forth darkness that briefly halts the bridge building, but Sita counters, invoking the sun, which burns for the good of all. A battle is joined between darkness and light, with the victorious sun eventually rising, and Rama reaching the shore of Lanka. Rama engages Ràvana in battle and kills him. The Rakshas flee and Surpanakhà brings Sita forward. Seeing her dressed as Raksha queen, Rama is anguished. He questions her loyalty and love, calling her a traitor. In her distress at Rama's doubt, Sita hears her mother, the Earth Goddess, who appears, calling Sita back to her. Surpanakhà, for her treachery, cannot live in the presence of the Earth Goddess, and falls to the ground dead. Rama begs for Sita to remain, but the Earth Goddess refuses. She then tells Rama that he is in fact the avatar of Vishnu the Preserver. Sita and her mother sink back down into the earth as the final curtain falls.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Raymond Head, the only scholar to publish about *Sita*, confuses the name of Rama's brother, giving it as Lakshmena, rather than Lakshman, as Holst spells it. He substitutes Holst's use of the word "comrade" with "consort." This is not a matter of Sanskrit translation, as Holst invented this section in an attempt to condense the action of the original. Head indicates that the battle between Ràvana and Indra by a Raksha at the beginning of Act II actually occurs in Holst's opera. Rather, a Raksha chief, Maritcha, retells a version of this battle to a group of Rakshas. When Rama is lured away from Sita and Lakshman by a Raksha trick, Head incorrectly observes that Lakshman also leaves to chase the faun. Rather, he leaves because Sita has questioned his loyalty to herself and Rama, an essential plot point. In Act III Head indicates that Rama raises an army to attack Ràvana's kingdom, when in fact it is Lakshman who raises the army and follows Rama, who has been led to Ràvana's kingdom by the Earth Goddess in the form of a bird. Most damaging to the understanding of the story, Head indicates that Rama does not recognize Sita when she appears

Holst's libretto has many affinities with the stories and librettos of Wagner's operas and music dramas, especially *Lohengrin* and *The Ring*. The events of *Sita* are almost an inverted version of the story of Lohengrin. Instead of Elsa calling for a hero and Lohengrin appearing, Rama, the hero, calls for a comrade, and Sita appears. Both Lohengrin and Sita put conditions on their lovers (Elsa may never ask Lohengrin's name or enquire of his past, Rama may never question Sita's loyalty), and it is the contravention of these conditions which leads to the forcible separation of the couples near the ends of the operas.

There is general character similarity between Ortrud and Surpanakhà. Ortrud places doubt in Elsa's mind about Lohengrin's past and nature, implying that he is really a sorcerer, while Surpanakhà dresses Sita in the clothes of a Raksha queen, sowing doubt in Rama's mind over her loyalty. The final similarity between the two stories is also the most oblique. In both stories, the forced separation of the two lovers leads to an important discovery. During Lohengrin's departure, it is discovered that the swan, which is to carry him away, was in fact Elsa's brother Gottfried, under Ortrud's enchantment. Lohengrin prays, undoing the magic, and proclaims the boy Duke of Brabant. In *Sita*, the Earth Goddess, before she takes Sita back from Rama, informs him that within he holds the godhead of Vishnu. These revelations (discovery of Gottfried, Rama's discovery he is an avatar) do not stop Lohengrin and Sita from leaving, but they do draw to a conclusion problems presented at the very outset of the operas (suspicion that Elsa has killed her brother, the hope that Vishnu in human form would triumph over Ràvana.)

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arrayed in the clothing of a Raksha Queen, when Holst's libretto makes it clear that not only does he recognize her, but he doubts her loyalty, setting into motion Sita's return to the Earth Goddess. See Head, "Holst and India I," 2-7.

There are a number of similarities between *Sita* and *The Ring*. Both are based on ancient epics populated by gods, humans, and other supernatural beings. Holst changes the home of Ràvana, Lanka, from a country divided from the mainland by a bay to a citadel surrounded by a raging torrent, suggesting a close parallel with Valhalla. There are also many parallels between principal characters.

Both Wotan and Ràvana have power over the gods and the earth, embody and uphold the prevailing law, and their willful actions bring about their demise. For Wotan, this begins with his refusal to hand over Freia to complete his contract with the giants for building Valhalla, and encompasses the stealing of the Rheingold from Alberich and his rampant infidelity to Fricka. Ràvana's actions as a cruel and unchecked demagogue provoke the Earth Goddess to call for a champion who can unmake Ràvana's power, just as Siegfried is devised by Wotan to unmake Alberich's curse. It should be noted, though, that Ràvana is a one-sided villain<sup>25</sup> when compared to Wotan, whose inner turmoil is demonstrated in his agonizing decision to punish his favorite daughter Brünnhilde for disobeying his command, even though her action reflected the wishes of his will.

There are resonances between the heroes of the stories, Rama and Siegfried, even though Siegfried's motivations and back-story are much more complex. Both must save their heroine (Sita and Brünnhilde, who are both, incidentally, daughters of an earth goddess), an operatic cliché, but the parallel becomes closer when one considers that standing between the heroine and the hero, in both cases, is the lawgiver who has supremacy over the gods (Wotan/Ràvana), whose power must be unmade (Wotan's spear shattered, Ràvana killed) before the lovers can be together. Both Rama and Siegfried are

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<sup>25</sup> Holst cut much of the inner turmoil Ràvana felt over the kidnap of Sita that is present in the original *Ramayana*, probably in an attempt to emphasize his villainous nature.

the unwitting agency of others. Barred by the law from taking the Ring from the giant/dragon Fafner, Wotan manipulates the creation of what he thinks is a free hero (Siegfried). In *Sita*, the Earth Goddess calls on Vishnu the Preserver to save her from the ravages of Ravana. She explains that gods are powerless against him, and that Vishnu must incarnate as a human avatar. He does so, becoming Rama, but as a human, he is unaware that he possesses a godhead. Both Rama and Siegfried are pawns in a much larger complex of events, involved in something much more than saving their heroines.

Holst was surely familiar with Wagner's works, but he was also exposed to the larger culture of turn-of-the-century British Wagnerism, where the facts of Wagner's life and the meaning of his works were open to interpretation by authors of the day,<sup>26</sup> and could also be appropriated to support a cause or viewpoint. George Bernard Shaw's 1898 essay, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, remains an insightful appropriation of Wagner's art to the socialist cause, but with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Wagner's revolutionary pronouncements were less applicable to active politics than artistic projects. At the time *The Perfect Wagnerite* was published, though, the role of socialism in Wagner's life and works were not clearly understood.<sup>27</sup> Shaw's essay describes the dwarfs, giants, and gods

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Ashton Ellis, who translated Wagner's prose works into English, gave a highly individual reading of Wagner's *Parsifal* for the Theosophical Society Journal, *The Theosophist* (William Ashton Ellis, "Wagner's *Parsifal* 1," *The Theosophist* 8, 1886): 162-68; William Ashton Ellis, "Wagner's *Parsifal* 2," *The Theosophist* 8, 1887): 222-28.), and his involvement with Theosophy also influenced his interpretations of Wagner's works, published later in *The Meister*. (For an overview of the contents of the entire run of *The Meister*, see Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, 40-9.)

<sup>27</sup> Wagner's involvement in the 1848 revolutions was a particular point of debate, and demonstrates how the facts of his life were contested. Perhaps the most infamous example of this was the first biography of Wagner in English, Ferdinand Praeger's *Wagner as I Knew Him*. The inaccuracies of this account of Wagner's life were vociferously attacked by Ashton Ellis in *The Meister* causing a rupture between him and the sponsoring Wagner Society, and precipitating, Sessa argues, the journal's abrupt cessation of publication in 1895. Of Ellis' critique of Praeger, Sessa writes: "Ellis argued in the *Meister* that Praeger's book was a fraud, that the man had much overrated his role in bringing Wagner to London in 1855, that his memory of the incidents of Wagner's visit and of other biographical details was very inaccurate, and that he had inexcusably altered much of his correspondence with Wagner... What seemed to trouble Wagner's acolyte most [Ellis] was Praeger's description of Wagner's role in the revolution in Saxony, 1848-9, and

of *The Ring* as representing different manifestations of humankind. The dwarfs and giants are cast as the working classes; the gods are the educated classes, but, to quote Anne

Dzamba Sessa, paraphrasing Shaw:

Because of the stupidity of the world, the gods are not able to rule by purest wisdom. They resort to law, punishments, and rewards, and are obliged to uphold the law even when it ceases to represent their thought, ceaselessly broadening and evolving with life in new directions. They are compelled to acquire the external trappings of authority. Into this situation comes Alberich. The gods illegally capture his power and are thus further compromised. They become, in Shaw's terminology, the Establishment, and they long secretly for a hero, an anarchist, who will destroy this mechanical empire of law and establish a "true republic of free thought."<sup>28</sup>

In *The Ring*, as Shaw observes, the law ceases to represent the will of the gods, and becomes a prison, which he compares to the capitalist system, created by the educated and moneyed classes, which has ceased to reflect their good intentions and become a yoke of oppression for the poor working classes. Shaw identifies the climax of *The Ring* as when Siegfried, whom he describes as "a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakoonin," a reference to the leader of the 1849 Dresden Uprising,<sup>29</sup> shatters Wotan's spear, destroying, in Shaw's interpretation, the power of capitalism. To Shaw, the remaining opera, *Die Götterdämmerung*, was an anticlimax:

*The Dusk of the Gods* is a thorough-paced grand opera. In it, you shall see what you have so far missed, the opera chorus in full parade on the stage, not presuming to interfere with the *prima donna* as she sings her death song over the footlights. Nay, that chorus will have its own chance when it first appears, with a good roaring strain in C major, not, after all, so very different from, or at all less absurd than the choruses of courtiers in *La Favorita*... and along with it we have theatrical grandiosities that recall Meyerbeer and Verdi: *pezzi d'insieme* for all the

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his handling of Wagner's character." See Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, 43-4. Praeger painted Wagner as one of the leaders and organizers of the Dresden Uprising, rather than simply an enthusiastic participant. In response, Ellis published a pamphlet, *1849: A Vindication*, which brought together all of the facts of the uprising and Wagner's participation in it, suggesting that while involved, Wagner's role was minor. See Ellis, *Wagner Sketches: 1849 a Vindication*.

<sup>28</sup> Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, 54-55.

<sup>29</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Ring of the Nibelungs*, 44.

principals in a row, vengeful conjurations for trios of them, romantic death song for the tenor: in short all manner of operatic conventions.<sup>30</sup>

He explains that *Die Götterdämmerung* was the first opera in the cycle to be conceived and was “The root from which all the others sprang,” and so more closely tied to the operatic conventions that preceded Wagnerian music drama.

In the same year Shaw published *The Perfect Wagnerite*, Holst began work on *Sita*, his most ambitious stage work.<sup>31</sup> This may be a coincidence, but given Holst’s interest in Wagner and in socialism, there is reason to believe that Shaw’s interpretation of *The Ring* as socialist opera colored Holst’s understanding of Wagner’s works and his approach to *Sita*, and it is not inconceivable that in light of Shaw, Holst thought that his use of Wagnerian techniques in a story glorifying socialism, was reflecting Wagner’s own goals in *The Ring*.

The socialist element of *Sita* is implicit in Rama’s imploring the gods to send him a “comrade,” not wife, nor lover, nor companion. Holst invented this moment, together with the subsequent first meeting of Rama and his “comrade” Sita. The word “comrade” subsequently appears often in interactions between Sita, Rama, and Lakshman, never amongst the Rakshas. This mode of address was pervasively used by Shaw in his writings and letters, and by others in the socialist movement.<sup>32</sup>

Holst’s use of the word “comrade” was the conspicuous indicator that he was departing from Wagner’s focus on passionate and familial love, although the concept of comradeship can be understood to fit into Wagner’s larger theory that expression of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 74-5.

<sup>31</sup> He also left the Royal College of Music and Hammersmith Socialist Club to play trombone in the Scottish Orchestra, Carl Rosa Opera Company (where he also worked as répétiteur), and various brass bands at seaside resorts.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters*, ed. Dan H. Laurence, 4 vols. (New York: Dodd, 1965), passim.



powerful, instinctive feeling was essential. Comradeship, the socialist belief in working and living for the good of all, was heavily emphasized by the William Morris strain of socialism to which Holst subscribed.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the portrayals of passionate love found in *The Ring* (Siegmond/Sieglinde, Siegfried/Brünnhilde), the love between Rama and Sita is strangely cerebral, as their first and only expression of their mutual love to each other demonstrates.

**Figure 5.1 Text of the First Interaction of Rama and Sita in *Sita***

Sita: Hail Rama, thy comrade am I by my mother's decree!

Rama: Thou! Who art thou?

Sita: I am Sita, the daughter of one who loves thee well. She is called the Earth. Thou hast prayed for a comrade, thy comrade is here. Naught to thee do I bring save love.

Rama: Good is the gift that thy mother has sent. Yet, first think awhile what fate awaits thee. No home wilt thou have for rest and for shelter. No guardians toward thee in trouble and stress.

Sita: My home is with thee and all earth's creatures. With thee to protect me, what more can I ask. Yet hark to me further. Earth and her daughter only may dwell where there is trust. Where there is faithfulness. Ne'er must thou doubt me! Lest back to her bosom my Mother recall.

Rama: Ne'er could I doubt the Earth or her daughter. Tell me but one thing, Say thou dost love me!

Sita: How can I say what never should be spoken? Words cannot reach where my thoughts now dwell. Only through thee do I know aught of joy. I have no life but what cometh through thee. Yet I am rich beyond all reckoning. Love doth crown me with wondrous wealth untold. To be with thee in trust and love, naught else in life do I ask.

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<sup>33</sup> For more information on Holst, William Morris, and the Hammersmith Socialist Club see above, chapter 3.

Rama:  
(simultaneously) Now do I thank the Gods who have heard my prayer.  
Sita my comrade, Sita my bride, tempests may rage o'er us,  
Death overcomes us, yet naught else destroy our trust and  
our love.

Sita:  
(simultaneously) "Naught else?" words without meaning. What more is life  
than trusting and loving? See all around us trees and rocks  
and mountains smile on us, silently giving the answer.

Rama: Mighty Earth! Thy gift I take gladly, and in return I can but  
offer one thing alone. Let me give my life, myself to thy  
service. Show me thy will. I am thy slave. Thy foes are  
mine. Bring me before them. Sharp is my sword!

Sita: Listen! Dost thou hear the voice of my mother answering  
sweetly? Clearer it grows. It saith to my heart: "Rama is thy  
husband." All things around repeat "Rama is thy husband."  
No other in the world save "Rama is thy husband." Vainly  
my heart seeks for words, yet none are found save that  
refrain. Yea, thou art my husband! To be with thee in trust  
and love! Naught else in life do I ask.

Rather than romance, the audience is given a philosophical debate on the meaning of love, which reinforces the claim that love and trust are the essence of life.<sup>34</sup> After this initial profession, Holst spends the rest of the opera exploring comradeship as in Act II, when Rama, Sita, Lakshman hail the rising of the sun to words which could be interpreted as a metaphor for the rise of socialism.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This stilted expression of love may seem curious coming from a newly married Holst, but it may also indicate Holst's own approach to considerations of love. In later years, he often lived apart from his wife, she in Thaxted and he in Hammersmith.

<sup>35</sup> The words are:

Sita: Hail the sun's uprising, source of all. See the night clouds parting, their conqueror is he. Birds and beasts awakening greet him as their master. Now shall also mankind arise and hail their lord. Hail the Sun's uprising, Lord of all is he. Hail ye fiery horses drawing forth his chariot. Naught can stay your coming. All pow'rful are ye! Rise up then all creatures. Night and gloom are vanquished. Fear and dread and trembling shall now be known no more. Hail the sun's uprising. To sick ones he brings healing. To poor ones he brings plenty. Comfort to the sad ones, health and gladness, strength and sweetness, joy and hope to all. Greet thou the sun now rising above us. See how his rays fill the earth with gladness. His glory doth shine in each corner and cranny. Thou art the sun, shine on ever o'er me. Fill me with thy rays of courage and joy. Thy rays of sweetness and strength, of hope and love.

Without comradeship, trust, and love, Rama would fail in his quest to rescue Sita— it underpins all the relationships between non-Rakshas in the opera. In Act III, comradeship is celebrated in the dramatic and musical highpoint of the work. This is not the reunification of Sita and Rama, but the scene immediately preceding, when Rama, Lakshman, and their men build a bridge over the raging torrent surrounding Lanka. Here, as Raymond Head points out, Holst makes another important change to the original story, transforming the army of animals that accompanied Lakshman into men,<sup>36</sup> creating an elaborate set piece that celebrates comradeship and success through communal work.

### **Figure 5.2 Text of Rama’s Bridge Building Song**

Rama:	Work away comrades, sharpen your sword blades. Bring hammer and axe for building our bridge. Work away comrades, how do the trees fall. What tree could withstand your mighty blows? Work away comrades a bridge we will build. To carry me over to one who awaits me. Earth and her creatures beckon us onward. The Raksha king’s might shall perish before us. Courage my Sita, not long shalt thou wait. Work away my comrades, now will we wend our way down to the river singing right joyously. Loudly your axes resound through the forest. Louder your song as the sturdy blows fall. Death to the Rakshas. Death to Ràvana. Courage my Sita, Rama is near.
Lakshman’s men:	Rama is near. Work away comrades. Now will we wend our way down to the river singing right joyously. Loudly our axes resound thro’ the forest. Louder our song as the sturdy blows fall. Earth and her creatures beckon us onward, singing right joyously. Build we our bridge. Work

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(Lakshman and Rama greet each other then join Sita and sing)

Rama, Lakshman,  
and Sita:

Hail the sun’s uprising, lord of the sky is he! Hail ye fiery horses, drawing his mighty car. Who can no withstand the monarch in his path? Hail mighty sun, thy slaves are we. Thou art creator, guardian, lord. Thou art the Gods’ diviner soul. Thou ‘tis that rulest night and day, the light and darkness, rain and storm. Resplendent on thy golden throne, thou art most glorious Lord of all!

<sup>36</sup> Head interprets this transformation as another attempt by Holst to make the libretto more palatable to Western audiences, ignoring the socialist implications of such a change. See Head, “Holst and India I,” 6.

away comrades singing right joyously. Work away  
comrades now will we wend our way down to the river,  
singing right joyously. Courage then Sita, Rama is near!

Rama needs the bridge in order to save Sita and avenge her abduction. The successful accomplishment of these tasks, including the defeat of Ràvana, not only upholds the principles of truth and love, but is good for the whole of the human community. The point of the story becomes the victory of Vishnu, and, consequently, the triumph of socialist ideals.

The virtues of socialism (represented by the actions and relationships of Rama, Sita, Lakshman, and their followers) are magnified because they are placed in opposition to the Rakshas, whose greed and jealousy make them selfish and concerned only about attaining and exercising power over others. This attitude is reflected in Surpanakhà's first interaction with Rama. She offers to save Rama if he cast off Lakshman and Sita in favor of her:

A Raksha am I. Thou hast conquered my brethren. Thee have I come to see e're thou art dead. I am Surpanakhà, sister of Ràvana. When he shall know how thou slayest the Rakshas, sharp will his vengeance be. Death then is nigh. Wouldst thou still live? Away with Lakshman, poor feeble warrior! Away with Sita! I am the bride worthy for thee. Glorious shalt thou be sharing my kingdom, sharing my power. Others do fear me. Gods fly away from me. Even Ràvana dreadeth my wrath. But as thy wife will I ever obey thee. Thou shalt be my husband, master, and lord.

Ràvana's decision to kidnap Sita provides another example of Raksha selfishness. He is at first hesitant to revenge his sister by kidnapping Sita as Surpanakhà suggests, but when he sees her his lust is inflamed and he must have her at any cost.

That jealousy, greed, and guile are traits of all Rakshas is reinforced by events at the beginning of Act II. Ràvana enters a Raksha camp to much supplication by his subjects. When he asks them to defeat Rama and Lakshman they refuse, putting their own

liveliness before revenging Rama and Lakshman's supposed ill treatment of Surpanakha. Rather than simply fight Rama, Ravana then turns to deception to capture Sita, in which his subjects gleefully assist. The characterization of the Rakshas explored above not only makes them the villains of the story, but also provides contrast to the glorious socialist heroes, demonstrating that selfishness, the antithesis of comradeship, is wicked and destructive.

Socialist precepts may also explain Holst's contrived ending. In the *Ramayana*, the Gods save Sita from suttee, proving her dedication to Rama, and they return to Rama's kingdom. Rama's people, however, are petty and small-minded, and demand that he banish Sita as she had lived as a wife with Ravana. Such poor judgment by the people would work against the positive depiction of socialism in the work. Holst replaces the ending with the dressing of Sita as a Raksha queen, Rama's denouncement of her, and the return of the Earth Goddess to claim her daughter, thus avoiding the negative portrayal of the common people. This ending is more consistent with a socialist interpretation than Head's contention that the removal of the suttee is a purposeful de-Indianizing. This seems unsatisfactory in light of the overt connections to Hinduism and India that Holst retained throughout the story, such as the names of the characters, use of Hindu philosophy, and Hindu place names.<sup>37</sup>

The music of *Sita* has long been marred in reputation by Imogen's allegations of Wagner worship, accepted without question by subsequent scholars.<sup>38</sup> As we shall see,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.: 4.

<sup>38</sup> Such allegations are inevitably paired with Holst's "discovery" of folksong, which is presented as the cure that helped him overcome Wagnerism. See Ibid.: 4-7; Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 11, 26-28; Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 4-16, 134-35; Short, *Gustav Holst*, 23-4, 41. A.E.F. Dickinson's posthumously published survey of Holst's music, though wildly inaccurate about the content of *Sita*, nonetheless identifies it as "a necessary stage of emancipation from the grand

Holst clearly understood Wagnerian techniques, and they do govern most of the work. At the same time, he departed from Wagner, moving beyond emulation towards individuality.

The Prologue of *Sita* demonstrates his understanding of the technique of *Leitmotiven*, the most pronounced indicator of Wagnerian influence in the work. Rather than a traditional overture, Holst opens with a short orchestral prelude similar in proportions to that of *Siegfried*, fulfilling the Wagnerian requirement of a short orchestral introduction to set the stage. He did not leave any analysis of themes in *Sita*, just as Wagner left no analysis of motif or structure in the music drama, so it is left to the scholar to derive meaning (and suitable descriptive titles) from context and usage. All of the themes presented in the prelude are associated, I argue, with the Hindu god Vishnu, and develop out of the *tutti* rising third (in yellow in figure 5.3), which opens the opera. In Hindu philosophy Vishnu is known as “The all or the universe... He who pervades everything... Pure existence... The essence of all beings.”<sup>39</sup> Vishnu as all-pervading essence is portrayed musically beginning in the third bar of the opera with a recurring rising third motive in the celli and bass (in green), hereinafter called the “Vishnu Essence Theme.” In measure 7, the range of this theme is extended to a perfect fifth and elaborated into a fanfare-like passage by the trombones (in blue). The recurrence and transformation of this theme throughout the opera suggests it represents Vishnu as a god (labeled the “Vishnu God Theme”).<sup>40</sup> At measure 17, the “Vishnu God Theme” is further

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Wagnerian precedent”, which is perhaps the most nuanced interpretation hitherto available of the place of *Sita* in Holst’s output. Dickinson, *Holst's Music*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> These descriptions are drawn from the Sri Vishnu Sahasranama (The Thousand Names of Vishni) an important text that is chanted in the Hindu religion to insure well being. See [http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/vishnu/vishnu\\_1.html](http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/vishnu/vishnu_1.html) <accessed 06 April 2007>.

<sup>40</sup> In Hindu belief, Vishnu could embody many different forms, often at the same time. He is the power behind all existence; he is also portrayed as a god and as a human avatar.

transformed into a proper brass fanfare to the accompaniment of the “Vishnu Essence Theme,” perhaps representing the power of Vishnu, although it is more difficult to suggest a meaning for this theme as its function seems transitional and it seems to only occur once.

**Figure 5.3 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 1-8**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Prologue of the opera Sita. The score is titled "Prologue" and "Molto Adagio". It features multiple staves for various instruments including Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Horns, Trumpets, Trombones, Timpani, Cymbals, and Violins. The score is annotated with performance instructions such as "dim" and "p". A yellow highlight covers the first few measures, and a blue highlight covers a specific section of the brass instruments. The bottom of the score is marked "Molto Adagio".

In the Prologue, these Vishnu themes contribute to the musical depiction of Vishnu incarnating into the human Rama and thus, to some degree, follows Wagner’s earlier precept that an orchestral prelude or overture should embrace, in miniature, the

essence of the drama to follow.<sup>41</sup> In order to understand how this is accomplished a detailed discussion of the thematic web of the Prologue is necessary. This will demonstrate how Holst uses the technique of *Leitmotiven* to deepen the events of the Sita story, in this case, the coming of Vishnu as a human avatar.

The curtain rises on the Prologue to agitated chromatic music representing the distress of the Earth Goddess who is enthroned on stage. The first intimation of her associative theme is heard in the clarinet, bassoon, and horn shortly after.<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 5.4 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 30-2**



This is followed by her description of Vishnu’s mysterious qualities, to the accompaniment of the Vishnu essence theme in the bassoon and horn.

**Figure 5.5 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 32-6**

This musical score shows seven staves for measures 32-6. The instruments are Flute, English Horn, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn 1 and 2 in F, Horn 3 and 4 in F, and The Earth. The Flute, English Horn, Clarinet in Bb, and Horn 1 and 2 in F play a sustained, chromatic harmonic texture marked *pp*. The Bassoon and Horn 3 and 4 in F play a melodic line with triplets, also marked *pp*. The Earth part is a vocal line with lyrics: "Vish - nu Pre - ser - ver thou that dwell - est in my - ster - y Be - hind cre - a - tion un - seen and un - known".

<sup>41</sup>Richard Wagner, “On the Overture,” in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, ed. William Ashton Ellis (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), 153-165.

<sup>42</sup> It is to this music, in the third act, that the Earth Goddess pulls Sita back to her care.



The “Earth Goddess Theme” is heard in the string accompaniment (in figure 5.6) accompanying her identification of herself. The pedal in the double basses clearly places the passage in D, but the ear is struck by the modal sound of the passage, created by C-natural. This more consonant, modal sound world will be a recurring emblem of the Earth in its purity, especially when the Earth goddess reappears in Act III.

**Figure 5.6 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 37-43**

The image shows a musical score for the Prologue of *Sita*, measures 37-43. It consists of a vocal line and a string accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: "Earth", "something that liveth", "dwell - eth in me", and "I am the". The string accompaniment is in bass clef and includes a prominent pedal point in the double basses, marked "Allegretto". The score is annotated with "dolce" in several places.

When she speaks of the evil Ràvana, the orchestral commentary ceases, leaving the barest accompaniment to the Earth Goddess’ agitated voice: a static chord that is broken only when she says that Ràvana has even battled the death god. At this moment, a theme is heard that (along with its variants) will come to represent battle and death.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 5.7 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 75-6**

The image shows a musical score for the Prologue of *Sita*, measures 75-6. It is a violin line in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The score consists of a single line of music with several chords and a melodic line.

The music of the Earth Goddess’s description of Ràvana’s exploits is in stark contrast with the lush string texture that accompanies her plea to Vishnu for assistance. When she tells of Ràvana, she is conveying information, describing who he is, and what he has done. This suggests a distinction of musical style between the conveying of information

<sup>43</sup> It may be this theme that Head is speaking of when in describing the end of Act II he says: “Sita is forced to become his [Ràvana’s] wife, while the appearance of ‘Yama the death God’ indicates that Ràvana’s fate is soon to be sealed.” Head, “Holst and India I,” 6.

necessary to the plot (Ràvana's actions) and the evocation of feeling and emotion (Earth Goddess' fervent pleas to Vishnu), an important aesthetic distinction in Wagner, which Holst may be employing here. As the Earth Goddess returns to her pleas, a new theme, related to her associative theme, takes shape in the accompaniment (mm. 75-82), signifying the coming of Vishnu to aid the earth (highlighted in gold in figure 5.8).

**Figure 5.8 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 75-82**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Prologue of *Sita*, measures 75-82. The score is written in black ink on a white background. It features several staves for different instruments and a vocal line. The tempo is marked "Poco Più Mosso". A section of the score, corresponding to measures 75-82, is highlighted in gold. The lyrics in Hindi are: "No apeli nah he verna to save his son man". The score also includes the word "Death" and the Sanskrit phrase "seva sordini seva sordin".

This theme expands and the meter changes to 6/8 in measure 83 (highlighted in gold in figure 5.9), gaining energy as the Earth Goddess's pleas become more fervent, reaching their climax to the words:

Mighty Vishnu, haste and destroy him. All creatures perish if thou wilt not aid. As god thou art pow'less. Come then as man knowing naught of thy godhead. Do thou the deed that only man may do. Vishnu mighty protector hearken.

Figure 5.9 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 82-9

The image shows a handwritten musical score for measures 82-9 of the Prologue to Sita. The score is for a full orchestra and includes vocal parts. A central section of the score is highlighted with a yellow background. The tempo is marked "Poco Allegro". The score includes various dynamics such as "cres", "p", "f", and "pp". The vocal parts include lyrics like "Vishnu" and "Raste".

At the Earth Goddess' call for Vishnu to destroy Ràvana (mm. 91-6, in turquoise in figure 5,10), the theme attains increased harmonic stability and coherence, reflecting the Earth Goddess's growing confidence that her pleas will be answered.

Figure 5.10 Prologue, Sita, measures 91-6

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Prologue of Sita, measures 91-6. The score is written on multiple staves, including Flute (Fl), Violin (Vn), Viola (Vla), Cello (Cl), Double Bass (Cb), and Voice (The Earth Goddess). The tempo is marked 'Allegretto'. The score features various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamics like 'dolce', 'sempre so', and 'dimin'. The score is highlighted with a light blue background.

The Earth Goddess then explains, to the accompaniment of the “Coming of Vishnu Theme,” that man alone can defeat Ravana, as gods are powerless. The “Vishnu God Theme” immediately builds to a great climax that heralds the sound of the wordless chorus singing the “Vishnu Essence Theme” (in green in figure 5.11) to what has become its characteristic accompaniment, alternating second inversion dominant and root position tonic chords. This is followed by the return of the “Vishnu God Theme” (in blue), which prepares the appearance of a theme that has characteristics of both the “Coming of Vishnu Theme” and the “Vishnu God Theme,” representing Rama, Vishnu’s human avatar (in orange).

Figure 5.11 Prologue, *Sita*, measures 120-38

The image shows a handwritten musical score for measures 120-38 of the Prologue in Sita. The score is written on multiple staves, including vocal lines and piano accompaniment. A large section of the score is highlighted in green, and a smaller section is highlighted in orange. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The text "[The Earth bows down covering her face in awe.]" is written above the green section. The score is numbered 11 in the top right corner.

Transformations of the “Coming of Vishnu Theme” and the “Rama Theme” constitute a short orchestral coda before the curtain falls on the Prologue, and a more extensive orchestral interlude develops the “Rama Theme,” suggesting the passage of time between the birth of Rama and his appearance in Act I as a man. This interlude flows into the beginning of Act I.

Throughout the prelude and the Prologue *Leitmotiven* specify and deepen our understanding of events on stage, allowing the orchestra to be the principal conveyer of drama and emotion, as is seen in the musical portrayal (discussed above) of the Earth's pleas to Vishnu, which begin in anguish and end in joy at his incarnating as Rama. Orchestral commentary has also been essential to the portrayal of the complex, threefold nature of Vishnu: as pure essence, god, and avatar. These Wagnerian devices continue in the music of the next two acts.

Having sampled the Wagnerian elements early in *Sita*, let us move to the final act of the opera, because it best illustrates Holst's assertion of his own individuality. This act does not, as Imogen Holst and Raymond Head contend, disrupt the overall unity of the opera, as Holst retains much material and many characteristics of the previous acts. According to Head, the changes in style in the third act of *Sita* reflect Holst's growing individuality and dissatisfaction with the "Wagnerian yoke." He writes:

New ideas, not found in the other acts, appear. His interest in folk-song during the years 1905-6 undoubtedly influenced the final revision of Act Three, not through any 'rustic' associations, but by increasing his melodic and rhythmic freedom. This he did even at the cost of unity of expression in *Sita* as a whole. These new ideas resulted in the use of irregular time signatures, 7/4, 9/4, 15/8, 5/4. In the interlude between Scenes One and Two there is a 15/8 flute melody over a 5/4 accompaniment. The modal influence led to the use of the flattened seventh as in the 'homage to Rama' theme in the opening bars of the act...The final bars, sung by the Earth Goddess, show some of the characteristic which were to be so important in *Sāvītri*, especially the use of irregular melodic outlines accompanied by a single sustained pedal note...The appearance of these new stylistic traits do suggest that Holst was probably revising *Sita* up to the last possible moment before the submission of the score for the Ricordi prize, given in 1908.<sup>44</sup>

The indicators of Holst's growing independence from Wagner in the last act of *Sita* are not as plentiful or as disruptive as Head would make it seem. Holst did express doubt

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.: 6-7.



about *Sita*,<sup>45</sup> but if he had been truly interested in winning the Ricordi Prize, and if he were as devastated by its failure to win, as commentators contend,<sup>46</sup> why would he make a conscious decision to weaken his score by changing musical style in the last act? A more detailed study of the manuscript score suggests that charges of unevenness are overstated, and might be another mischaracterization of Wagner in Holst scholarship.

Many of the elements that Head describes as being new to the final act are found earlier in the opera. The 7/4 time signature is used for the music of the appearance of Sita, which was first heard in Act I. Irregular melodies over sustained chords appear in the Prologue as the Earth Goddess explains Ràvana's tyranny over the earth. Modality is present in the score from almost the very beginning (the music of the Earth Goddess). New in the last act is that all of these musical characteristics appear more frequently.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, the number of associative themes from previous acts that reappear in the last act, some unchanged, others transformed, suggest that Holst was not as dissatisfied with the "Wagnerian yoke" as Head contends.<sup>48</sup> For example, the associative theme that comes to stand for Sita's faithfulness in Act I (mm.191-4 and mm.197-9 in Figure 5.12).

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<sup>45</sup> Holst expressed his doubts to Vaughan Williams in a letter quoted earlier. (Vaughan Williams and Holst, *Heirs and Rebels: Letters Written to Each Other and Occasional Writings on Music*, 12.) Fritz Hart writes of Holst's dismissal of the piece later in life. Holst expresses these same sentiments in a letter to W.G. Whittaker. See Hart, "Early Memories of Gustav Holst II," 85; Short, ed., *Gustav Holst, Letters to W. G. Whittaker*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> See Head, "Holst and India I," 7; Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 31; Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*, 79; Short, *Gustav Holst*, 72.

<sup>47</sup> The increased austerity and modality identified by Imogen Holst and Raymond Head in the second scene of Act III, with its more frugal orchestration, reduced figuration, and chromatic modulation, in addition to pointing to a distinctly Holstian compositional voice, can also be construed as a musical evocation of the newly purified state of the world after the defeat of Ràvana and his Rakshas. Modality has been closely associated with the Earth Goddess, and its pervasiveness in the final scene could reflect the return of the earth to her power. If understood in this way, then elements of the musical setting at the end of the opera become not only a foreshadowing of *Sāvitrī*, as Head contends, but also the logical conclusion of events put in motion at the beginning of the opera, when the Earth Goddess calls on Vishnu to save the earth from Ràvana's tyranny.

<sup>48</sup> Head, "Holst and India I," 6.

Figure 5.12 Act I, *Sita*, measures 191-207

This faithfulness theme returns transformed in Act III upon Rama's first sight of Sita in the clothes of a Raksha queen. Holst retains the melodic contour of the theme, but changes the intervals, introducing half steps and tritones to represent the betrayal of trust



(mm. 340-7 in the following example). At Sita’s warning to Rama to remember that he must not doubt her, the “Trust Theme” reappears exactly as it did at the moment of Sita’s original warning in Act I (mm.348-50 below), evoking the memory of their initial promises of love and faithfulness.

**Figure 5.13 Act III, *Sita*, measures 340-352**

The musical score for Act III, Sita, measures 340-352, is presented in a standard orchestral format. The score includes parts for Flute I and II, Flute III, Oboe, English Horn, Clarinet in Bb, Bass Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn I and II in F, Horn III and IV in F, Cornets in A, Sita, Rama, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The tempo is marked 'Più mosso' and 'Largamente'. The lyrics for Rama are: 'I seek an out-cast a poor star-ving pris-on-er Tell me thou Queen What has be-fall-en her— Be-ware— Did I not warn thee nev-er to doubt.'

After this, though, the “Trust Theme” always appears in a tritonal variant (mm. 324-7 in Figure 5.14). This theme fragments, and then disappears with the arrival of the Earth Goddess, who replaces Rama’s distrust with her unquestioning love, an action depicted by the appearance of the same music with which the Earth Goddess sent Sita to Rama in Act I (mm. 339-42 in figure 5.14).

Figure 5.14 Act III, *Sita*, measures 318-42

These examples illustrate, by means of samples, that for most of the final act, Holst retains a motivic web in the orchestra based on themes developed in the earlier acts.

The one scene where Holst does abandon the motivic web— Act III, scene 2— depicts Rama, Lakshman, and their “comrades” building a bridge across the torrent into Lanka. This is perhaps the most characteristic Holstian music of the opera, including varying two and three bar ostinatos that create unexpected rhythmic accents and a straightforward, unpretentious tune of the kind found in the central section of “Jupiter” from *The Planets*. The scene, though, is not completely divorced from Wagner. In scale and grandeur it is akin to those few moments of spectacle found in Wagner’s works, such as the entrance of the gods into Valhalla at the end of *Das Rheingold*<sup>49</sup> (with the additional parallel of the bridge), or Siegfried’s funeral march in *Die Götterdämmerung*.

<sup>49</sup> This moment shares a further parallel with *Sita* in that both involve the crossing of a bridge.

After this scene, the principal tune becomes a *Leitmotiv*, helping to integrate this scene into the web of themes that recommences after the bridge is built.<sup>50</sup> The scene opens with a solo for Rama and builds in excitement as the chorus echoes his words in unison, then in imitation to an ever-transforming orchestral accompaniment and ostinato (predominantly in the strings), as this excerpt shows.

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<sup>50</sup> Though this spectacle lacks the web of associative themes, it is prefaced by a long monologue in which Rama recounts the events that have occurred between Act II and III where associative themes are ubiquitous, he also follows the bridge building scene with an extensive orchestral interlude where the bridge theme is subjected to development and combination with themes representing Rama, Sita, their trust, and the Earth Goddess.

Figure 5.15 Act III, *Sita*, measures 372-434

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 372-434) includes parts for Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet in Bb, Bass Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn in F, Trumpet in Bb, Trombone, Bass Trombone, Timpani, Percussion, Ramu (Soprano), Tenor, Baritone, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The vocal parts (Ramu, Tenor, Baritone) have lyrics in Hindi and English. The second system (measures 435-500) includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Cor Anglais (C. A.), Clarinet in Bb (Cl.), Bass Clarinet (B. Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horn in F (Hrn.), Trombone (Tbn.), Bass Trombone (B. Tbn.), Timpani (Timp.), Percussion (Perc.), Baritone (Bar.), Tenor (T.), and Double Bass (Db.). The vocal parts continue with lyrics in Hindi and English. The score features various musical notations, including dynamics (p, mp, mf, f, ff, cresc., decresc.), articulation (acc.), and performance instructions (sol.).

FL

Ob.

C. A.

Cl.

B. Cl.

Bsn.

Hrn.

Tpts.

Tbn.

B. Tbn.

Timp.

Perc.

Bar.

T.

Bar.

Vln. I.

Vln. II.

Vla.

Vcl.

Db.

sing - ing right joy - ons - ly  
 Loud - ly our ax - es re - sound thro' the for - est Loud - er our song as the sur - dy blows fall. Earth and her

FL

Ob.

C. A.

Cl.

B. Cl.

Bsn.

Hrn.

Tpts.

Tbn.

B. Tbn.

Timp.

Perc.

Bar.

T.

Bar.

Vln. I.

Vln. II.

Vla.

Vcl.

Db.

crea - tures Beck - on us on - - - - - ward Sing - ing right joy - ons - ly Build we our bridge  
 Earth and her crea - tures beck - on us on - - - - - ward

Although one tune is repeated throughout the scene, the interplay of Rama and the men's chorus, the gradual addition of instruments with every repetition, and the alternation between meters in two and three produce a clever build-up of excitement. Later, when the bridge music reappears in scene two, Holst specified that it be accompanied by the offstage sound of hammers struck to the rhythms of the ostinato. This is not unlike the use of the famous tuned anvils during Wotan and Loge's descent to Nibelheim in *Das Rheingold*, although it is not clear if Holst's hammer blows are pitched.

As discussed earlier, the bridge building scene confirms the triumph of comradeship in both word and action: without everyone working together, Rama would never be able to reach Lanka and save Sita. This consummation of the socialist principles, articulated earlier in the opera between Rama, Sita, and Lakshman, may explain Holst's more individualistic musical setting. The events of the concluding scene which follows (including the disguise of Sita, her rejection by Rama, Sita's return to the Earth Goddess, and Rama's discovery of his godhead) are all possible because of the comradeship demonstrated in the bridge scene. This may explain why the final scene seems somewhat anticlimactic, though it does demonstrate what happens when one abandons trust and comradeship, as well as providing closure to the plotlines and relationships in the story.<sup>51</sup>

The third act of *Sita* represents a move toward individuality, as previous scholars have argued, but that this sacrifices unity and cohesion in the work as a whole is eminently disputable. Act III contains much material from earlier acts, and is still indebted to Wagnerian techniques, though Holst sometimes transforms the way they are

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<sup>51</sup> The remainder of the opera seems strangely anticlimactic, which parallels Shaw's interpretation of *The Ring*, discussed earlier. (Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Ring of the Nibelungs*, 74-5.) Rather than a conscious emulation of Shaw's interpretation, it is more likely that the sense of anti-climax is the result of Holst's reworked and somewhat unfulfilling ending.

used. When the Earth Goddess explains to Rama that he is the avatar of Vishnu, the Vishnu themes (“Coming of Vishnu Theme,” “Vishnu God Theme,” and “Rama Theme”) appear in the same order and same versions as they were presented in the Prologue, when Vishnu incarnated into Rama. That these themes appear undeveloped represents a departure from Wagnerian practice (though there is a Wagnerian resonance in the symmetry formed by the return of the themes, obviously planned as part of the drama), foreshadowing Holst’s use of associative themes in *Sāvitrī*.<sup>52</sup> The final music of the opera is the “Vishnu Essence Theme,” first heard in the third bar of the work, providing unity between the opening and closing of the opera.<sup>53</sup>

The failure of *Sita* to win the Ricordi opera competition<sup>54</sup> may have accelerated Holst’s development towards greater freedom from Wagnerian emulation, but contrary to received wisdom there was no decisive break between *Sita* and *Sāvitrī*, whatever the drastic change in external trappings, only a further development of Holst’s relationship away from the externals of Wagner’s style and methods. *Sita* represents an emulation of Wagner with flashes of individuality, whereas, *Sāvitrī* is, overall, more Holstian with moments of Wagnerian imitation.

The consideration of the Wagnerian elements in the libretto and music of *Sita* highlights the continually evolving process that led to increased attempts at individuality in the final act, without overwhelming the precedents that Holst had set in the previous two. The study has also examined the centrality of socialism to the story, which may have

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<sup>52</sup> The fact that associative themes in the third act are also more apt to be found in the voice parts, is another departure from Wagnerian thinking that Holst would develop further in *Sāvitrī*.

<sup>53</sup> According to Hindu belief, Vishnu is the unchanging all powerful force behind existence. It is possible to argue that the use of the Vishnu essence theme to bookend the opera reflects the Hindu belief that Vishnu is the all powerful force behind all existence, and that the theme has been ongoing throughout, unchanged, audible only when the characters are aware and focused on the power of Vishnu at the opening and end of the opera.

<sup>54</sup> This is discussed in chapter 4, and was one of the reasons for Holst’s trip to Algeria.

been influenced or inspired by George Bernard Shaw's socialist interpretation of Wagner and *The Ring*. These considerations highlight the positive role of Wagnerian influence in Holst's developing compositional voice, and also deepen our understanding of how the culture of *fin-de-siècle* British Wagnerism helped to shape his understanding of Wagner and his music.



## Chapter VI

### Following Where Wagner Led: Individuality and the Continuation of Wagnerian Tradition in *Sāvitrī*

In 1906, Holst had entered *Sita* into a competition for a Ricordi Prize for British opera. It placed second to Edward Naylor's *The Angelus*, and as a consequence, Holst received no cash prize, no publication, and no guaranteed performance.<sup>1</sup> As Imogen Holst recalled: “The failure was a bitter blow, and he needed all the philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* to see the matter in its true perspective.”<sup>2</sup> To help assuage his disappointment, Holst embarked on a four-week vacation to Algeria. This trip, discussed in detail in chapter 4, was a significant benchmark in Holst’s life, marking the divide between *Sita* and *Sāvitrī*.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Michael Short, “Two other operas had been placed second in order of merit: *Helen*, and *Sita*, from which Holst realized that he had failed to win the prize by only a narrow margin. Fritz Hart recalled that Stanford had ‘disliked *Sita* intensely and unreasonably,’ and as it emerged that another of the judges had cast his vote in favour of *Sita*, it is possible that the prize-winner had been chosen as a compromise in the face of irreconcilable opinions.” Michael Short, *Gustav Holst* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 72. At the time of the loss (1906), there was little opportunity for the performance of a Wagnerian music drama by an untested British composer. The British National Opera Company had yet to be founded, and while the Carl Rosa Opera Company did commission and perform British operas, commissions went largely to established musical figures like Stanford and Alexander Mackenzie. Additionally, the stage requirements for Holst’s opera would have made the performance of *Sita* a daunting undertaking, especially for a touring opera company like Carl Rosa that sometimes performed in multiple halls in a week.

<sup>2</sup> As always, such statements from Imogen on events that occurred before her birth should be accepted with caution. However, the circumstances surrounding the failure of *Sita*, especially the trip to Algeria for which he had to borrow money to undertake, and did so shortly after the birth of Imogen, suggest that he was strongly affected by the opera’s failure. Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 31.

Holst's biographers have simplistically characterized *Sāvitrī* as the outright rejection of Wagner, brought on by the failure of *Sita*.<sup>3</sup> Imogen writes about the impact of writing *Sāvitrī* on her father: "at last he had freed his thought from the influence of other music, and although in the future he was to write many things that were purposely founded on folk-tunes, his original compositions were to be unmistakably his own."<sup>4</sup> Nalini Gwynne, in her dissertation, *India in the British Musical Imagination: 1880-1940*, focuses on connections between the structure and character of *Sāvitrī* and elements of Hindu culture available to Holst in London. Her study heralds not only a reassessment of Holst's Sanskrit works, but a much more open approach to the influences at work in them. She wrote:

I am not advocating that we see Holst's language as coming only— or entirely— from engagement with Sanskrit language, Vedic philosophy, and Indian music. That would confine Holst's music within terms as rigid and narrow as those constructed by the nationalists.<sup>5</sup>

However, she concurs with Imogen about the influence of Wagner in Holst's works, writing: "With the *Hymns from the Rig Veda* (1907-1912) and *Sāvitrī* (1909)... he irrevocably parted company with the Wagnerian musical past that he... embraced."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Short writes comparing Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* to *Sāvitrī*: "The subtlety of the work is an antithesis to some of the bombastic methods of the nineteenth-century; the same reaction as that experienced by Debussy, but it is worth noting that *Pelleas et Melisande* was not performed in England until May 1909 when *Sāvitrī* had already been completed." Short, *Gustav Holst*, 77. Jon Mitchell concurs with Short emphasizing the difference between *Sāvitrī* and *Sita*: "*Sāvitrī* provided a break from all operas composed in the century that preceded it, and not just Holst's. About the only thing that *Sāvitrī* and Holst's previous opera *Sita* have in common is the fact that each comes from a later Sanskrit source. Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 36. Imogen's belief that *Sāvitrī* marked the end of Wagnerian influence is further demonstrated in her essay "Following Where Wagner Led" when she says of *Sita*: "Most of the work still seems like "good old Wagnerian bawling."... In 1908, two years after finishing *Sita*, he wrote his second Indian opera, *Sāvitrī*. There could have been no greater contrast. Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 134-35.

<sup>5</sup> Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940", 103.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Gwynne and Imogen are most likely drawing conclusions from the extreme contrast between *Sita* and *Sāvitrī* in terms of scale and performing forces. While *Sita* calls for a large orchestra, *Sāvitrī* calls for eleven players. Lasting over three hours, *Sita* is Wagnerian in proportions, while *Sāvitrī* is a mere half an hour, and amenable to staging so modest as not attempted in serious British opera since Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. What has always been overlooked, though, is that while *Sāvitrī* and the *Rig Veda Hymns* do represent a major turning point in Holst's compositional style, such turning points are seldom clean and decisive breaks with a prior influence. While most outer trappings of Wagnerian influence—immensity in scope and forces, and extreme chromaticism—are indeed absent in *Sāvitrī*, I will argue that much Wagnerian thinking remains in Holst's opera. Considering the Wagnerian aspects of *Sāvitrī* places it within the larger biographical and analytical continuum of Holst's relationship with Wagner, while also complementing the Indian influences found in the work by Gwynne, and re-evaluating, but not discarding the influence of Purcell and folksong that were declared central by early critics and affirmed by Imogen.<sup>7</sup>

As was seen in the last chapter, in completing the last act of *Sita* Holst began to experiment with individuality, integrating increased austerity, rhythmic freedom, and modality with the Wagnerian elements of the work. As his next operatic project, *Sāvitrī*

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<sup>7</sup> The Purcell-*Sāvitrī* connection derives from a letter Holst wrote to W. G. Whittaker in 1917: "I find that unconsciously I have been drawn for years towards discovering the (or a) musical idiom of the English language. Never having managed to learn a foreign language, songs always meant to me a peg of words on which to hang a tune. The great awakening came on hearing the recits in Purcell's *Dido*. Can you or anyone tell me 1) how he managed *straight away* to write the only really musical idiom of the English language we have yet had 2) why he—who developed in every other way in music—never ever repeated this idiom (or hardly ever) but contented himself with more and more conventional *secco* in pure Italian style. Well, I didn't get very far in *Sita* which is good old Wagnerian bawling I fear. But in all the *Vedas* matters improved and in the CM [*Cloud Messenger*] and *Sāvitrī*, especially the latter, the words and music really grew together." Short, ed., *Gustav Holst, Letters to W. G. Whittaker*, 23-24. I am not suggesting that the influence of Purcell is not valid, especially in the setting of the text, only that its emphasis along with that of folksong has unnecessarily confused the myriad of influences that we now realize went into *Sāvitrī*. See also Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 136.

represented the “fresh things” to which he hoped Wagner would lead: a transformation of Wagnerian concepts within the context of Holst’s growing individuality. This chapter will examine the Wagnerian elements in the libretto and music of *Sāvitrī* in order to understand how Holst adapts them to his own dramatic and philosophical purposes. In the music, Holst uses Wagnerian chromaticism as one option for moments of high drama, rather than his comprehensive musical style, as in *Sita*. Buttressing the music and libretto are affinities between the Hindu beliefs held by Holst and articulated in *Sāvitrī*, and Wagner’s expression of the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Investigating the Wagnerian subtext of *Sāvitrī* does not question its reception as one of Holst’s first individual masterpieces, but like the music of Debussy, Strauss, Massenet, Rimsky-Korsakov, and other important composers of the decades following Wagner’s death, it illustrates Holst’s assimilation of Wagnerian tradition into his personal style.

The plot of *Sāvitrī* is as follows: Sāvitrī hears the voice of Death telling her that he is coming for her husband, Satyavan, a woodsman. Unusual for her ability to see beyond *Māyā* (the Hindu concept of illusion), she hears the figure of Death approaching. Satyavan returns home and senses Sāvitrī's distress, falls ill, and then dies as Death appears on stage. Sāvitrī, instead of being enraged with Death for the loss of her husband, welcomes Death and invites him into her home. He demurs, but, for her kindness, grants Sāvitrī a boon: anything but the revival of Satyavan. She asks for life, explaining that death is momentary but that life is eternal. Death, enthralled by Sāvitrī’s understanding of life and death, grants her wish. She then tells Death that she has no life without Satyavan. Having promised her life, Death has been tricked. Satyavan reawakens in Sāvitrī's arms, and Death returns, defeated, to his kingdom.

The libretto for *Sāvitrī* is based on an episode of the *Mahabharata* that Holst probably encountered in Ralph Griffiths' *Specimens of Old Indian Poetry and Idylls from the Sanskrit*.<sup>8</sup> By the time Holst began to write the libretto to *Sāvitrī* in 1908 he could, with help of a dictionary, probably understand some of the text in the original Sanskrit,<sup>9</sup> and it is possible that he consulted original Sanskrit sources.

Wagnerian thought is felt strongly in the libretto. Holst focuses attention on the passionate interaction of the characters, much more so than in *Sita*. To accomplish this, he eliminates the back-story from his scenario. His omission of almost all reference to time and place in the story, as Wagner in *Die Walküre* for example, relaxes the audience's frame of reference and focuses attention on the emotions of characters. Holst removes many external references to Hinduism. The events that led to the encounter of *Sāvitrī* and Satyavan with Death, including a prophecy of Satyavan's demise and the feasting and sacrifices *Sāvitrī* made in order to obtain the ability to see Death, are expunged. These changes point to Holst's attempt to shorten the opera and produce a more universal story focused on the emotions expressed on the stage.

Within the libretto there are further resonances with Wagnerian concepts and characters. The redemptive power of female characters such as Senta, Brünnhilde, and Elsa has its parallel in *Sāvitrī*. It is *Sāvitrī*'s job to redeem Satyavan when Death comes to

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<sup>8</sup> Head, *Holst and India III*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> The circumstances surrounding Holst's study of Sanskrit and the extent to which he was able to read it without a dictionary are contested issues. A Sanskrit primer owned by Holst, now lost, had only 19 of 65 lessons completed, suggesting that his understanding of the language was rudimentary at best. For a careful consideration of the facts about Holst's knowledge of Sanskrit see: Head, "Holst and India II," 28.

claim him.<sup>10</sup> In a general sense, her equating her happiness with Satyavan's life recalls Senta, who can only find fulfillment in a union with the Dutchman through death.

In addition, the tension between what is legal and what is right, a theme repeatedly played out in Wagner's works, is present in *Sāvītri*.<sup>11</sup> On first entering the stage, Death sings: "Sāvītri, Sāvītri, I am Death. I am the law that no man breaketh."<sup>12</sup> Satyavan must die because Death, who is the embodiment of the law, has come for him, but the right thing to do is to let Satyavan live for the sake of Sāvītri's happiness. Death initially seems an undesirable character that, like Beckmesser when he marks Walter in the singing contest, is unable to see beyond the laws that he must enforce. When Sāvītri tricks Death, though, she robs him of his menace, and he admits that death, like life, is but illusion. Unlike Beckmesser, who cannot understand the raw beauty of Walter's song for all of its transgression of the rules, Death understands, perhaps has always understood, that the laws he enforces are ephemeral, that he is no more reality than life itself. Consequently, he concedes defeat when Sāvītri not only defies but also overwhelms his laws by the power of her love. By tricking Death, Sāvītri not only redeems Satyavan, she proves that what is right, the emotional expression of love, over the cold logic of intellect, will always succeed. The most important difference in Holst's use of the legal versus right theme is that Sāvītri faces no consequences for defiance of the law, as Brünnhilde does when she is put into a magic sleep and imprisoned within a ring of fire by her father, Wotan, for having tried to rescue Siegmund and having saved Sieglinde.

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<sup>10</sup> In the *Mahabharata* Satyavan is fated by the gods to die within a year of marriage to Sāvītri, and no explanation is given as to why.

<sup>11</sup> For a fascinating consideration of this principle from a purely legal perspective, see Peter M. Wolrich, "Wagner's 'Ring' Interpreted in Light of Legal Principles," *Law and Literature* 14, no. 1, Spring (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Gustav Holst, *Sāvītri*, Full Score, Revised ed. (London: Curwen, 1973), 3.

Although in the music of *Sāvītri* Holst rejects Wagnerian size and grandeur, it exhibits musical characteristics that are indebted to the Wagnerian techniques used in *Sita*. Holst demonstrated an understanding of *Leitmotiven* in *Sita*, but here, though he retains the concept of associative themes, they lack the terseness and combinatoriality of Wagner’s leitmotifs, making the creation of a web of *Leitmotiven* impractical. Their frequent appearance in the vocal parts is also not Wagnerian. I have identified three important associative themes in *Sāvītri*, one for Death, one for Satyavan, and one for Sāvītri’s comfort.

The opera commences with Death singing his associative theme offstage and unaccompanied.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 6.1 Death Theme, *Sāvītri*, measures 1-25**

*Andante moderato*

Death (unseen) *mf* Sā - vi - tri! Sā - vi - tri! I Am Death! I am the law that no man breaketh I am he who leadeth men on - ward, I am the road that each must tra - vel, I am the gate that o - pens for all, I, the Sum - mon - er, Whom all o - bey, Whose word may not be mov - éd, Whose path may not be turn - éd. I draw nigh to ful - ful my work, I come for thy hus - band, For him the gate doth o - pen.

<sup>13</sup> The Death theme appears at the following places:

<i>measure numbers</i>	<i>performer</i>
1-49	Death (unaccompanied) then picked up by viola
46-47	Sāvītri
58-61	Sāvītri
103-107	Sāvītri
135-138	orchestra
146-158	orchestra (ostinato)
172-200	orchestra (ostinato)
200-213	Death (first entrance on stage)
232-248	Death (begins as Death theme but works away)
257-275	Death (begins as Death theme but works away)
345-354	Sāvītri
365-368	Sāvītri
455-460	Sāvītri
487-493	Satyavan
493-496	Sāvītri
516-526	Death/orchestra

The theme is harmonically fluid and chromatic. The initial tonal center seems to be A, but this is undermined by the appearance of D-sharp and A-flat, the latter, which transforms from the enharmonic equivalent of the leading tone to something akin to a tonic by measure 17. The appearance of the augmented second (F-G-sharp) in measure 5 emphasizes the chromatic sound of the music. All of this calls into question the role of A as a point of rest, weakening the tonic. The melody makes frequent use of augmented and perfect intervals, and semitonal shifts. Its length (25 measures) and recitative-like quality precludes Wagnerian treatment. Nonetheless, this theme, or fragments of it, recurs throughout the opera in both the voice and orchestra when Death is referenced in the drama, and its initial sparseness sets the tone for the opera.

The second theme that appears is connected with Satyavan, and like the Death theme its first complete iteration is offstage and unaccompanied. In contrast to the chromatic nature of Death's theme, Satyavan's theme, with its flattened seventh scale degree, conveys a strong modal impression.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 6.2 Satyavan Theme, *Sāvitrī*, mm. 72-83**

<sup>14</sup> The Satyavan theme occurs at the following places:

<i>measure numbers</i>	<i>performer</i>
54-59	orchestra
61-67	Satyavan (from a distance)
72-96	Satyavan (unaccompanied at first then orchestra joins)
139-146	Satyavan
473-478	Sāvitrī
480-481	orchestra



The first measure, and its rising scale with F-sharp suggests Dorian, while the following measure, with its F-natural suggests Aeolian (mm. 72-3). The first half of the melody ends with a clear cadence on A in measure 77. The second half of Satyavan's music (mm. 78-83) modulates to E, with the reappearance of F-sharp and introduction of G-sharp in the first three measures suggesting a mixture of Ionian and Mixolydian on E (m. 78). The singular and fleeting appearance of F-natural in this context at measure 80 and Holst's careful treatment of the augmented second it creates, coupled with the strength of the key area of E created by the outlining of an E major triad in measure 78, greatly reduces the harmonic disruption of this chromatic note.<sup>15</sup> In the final four measures, F-natural does not return; instead, Holst creates unity between the two halves (mm. 72-77, and mm. 78-83) by extending the range of the melody upward from C (m. 79) to D (m. 81) and finally to the tonic E (m. 82). This creates intervallic unity between the last five pitches of the Aeolian mode (A B C D E F G A, W ½ W W ½ W W) used in the first half of Satyavan's melody, and the last five pitches of the mode mixture which comprises the material for the second half (E F-sharp (F) G-sharp A B C D E, W W ½ W ½ W W). This theme returns when he threatens an unknown foe (mm. 140-145) at the appearance of the Death theme, and Sāvitrī sings it as Satyavan awakens out of Death's sleep (mm. 473-481).

It will be noticed that though the overall aural effect of these two themes is dissimilar, both Death and Satyavan share similar pitch material, as well as A as an important tonal center. Furthermore, both melodies contain the same augmented second F-G-sharp. Nalini Gwynne argues convincingly that the opening melodies of Death and Satyavan are closely connected to Holst's *Hymns from the Rig Veda*, whose structure and

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<sup>15</sup> This is in contrast to the augmented seconds found in Death's music (m. 5, 7, 11, 20-25), which help create instability.

rhythms reveal a close affinity with the traditional chanting of the Rig Veda texts in Sanskrit and the structure of Indian classical music.<sup>16</sup>

The last important associative theme is connected to Sāvitrī, and her power to bring comfort.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 6.3 Comfort Theme, *Sāvitrī*, measures 159-176**

(bending over him)

Sāvitrī *p*  
I am with thee, my arms are round thee, Thy thoughts are mine, My spir - it dwells with thee. When thou art wea - ry U am

Flute *p*

Double Bass

S.  
watch - ing, Ehn thou sleep - est I am wak - ing, When in sor - row I am near

Fl.  
*pp*

Db.

S.  
mak - ing it a thing of joy Be - yond all o - ther joys.

Fl.

Db. *mp* legato e pesante

Like Satyavan's theme, it is a modal tune in A Aeolian, first heard when she comforts Satyavan as Death comes to claim him (mm. 159-173). There it competes with fragments of the death theme, first alternating with it, and then both death and comfort themes are played concurrently (mm. 183-200). After Death arrives onstage (m. 200), the comfort theme does not appear again until the last moments of the opera, where Sāvitrī sings it to the accompaniment of an ostinato based on a fragment of the Death theme (portraying

<sup>16</sup> Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940", 73-103.

<sup>17</sup> The Comfort theme and its variants can be found at:

<i>measure numbers</i>	<i>performer</i>
159-176	Sāvitrī
183-200	Sāvitrī/orchestra (in competition to Death theme, which eventually defeats it)
507-516	Sāvitrī
526-end	Sāvitrī (in the distance)

Death departing into the distance, m. 532). The ostinato ceases and only the “comfort theme” is left to end the opera.

These three themes allow the orchestra to have increased expressive potential, as when Satyavan lay stricken. A fragment of the death theme is heard in the celli and bass as an accompanying ostinato, and distorts Satyavan’s dying pleas, making them increasingly chromatic and harmonically unstable. There is a momentary lapse in Death’s influence as Sāvītri sings her comfort song, but it too is overwhelmed by the return of the death ostinato, growing in volume as instruments join, to which Sāvītri describes the world around her withering at Death’s growing influence on it. As she does this, her music displays increased harmonic instability. Only at the climax of Sāvītri’s description does Death actually appear on stage. This example demonstrates that the orchestra is still a strong participant in the portrayal of drama and strong emotion on stage, but the story lacks both the complexity of plot and characterization to provide enough associative material to create a complex web of associations. Associative themes do, at times, provide essential intensification of the emotions, deepening the struggle between life and death that underlies the story, and in so doing retain an important affinity with their Wagnerian roots.

Perhaps the strongest aural affinity to the music of Wagner in *Sāvītri* comes in the central section (mm. 279-473), where she convinces Death to grant her a boon, and so tricks him into returning Satyavan. Here Holst abandons his associative themes for an aria-like passage. As Sāvītri’s pleas for life become more passionate, the music grows increasingly modulatory; strings of seventh chords begin to appear in rising sequences coupled with chromatic bass lines. The gestures of the phrase sound more Wagnerian

than the austere music that opened the opera, in their upward swells of sound, which sustain and/or increase dramatic intensity.

Figure 6.4 *Sāvitrī*, measures 351-398

351 *poco cresc.* *rall.* *Andante* *p*

S. lone-ly and de-so-late Man must go. But Life is com-mun-ion Each one that liv-eth, liv-eth for all. Thou art for the mo-ment, A por-tal soon

Fl. I *p* *mf* *p*

Eng. Hn. *p* *mf* *p*

Vln. I *p* *mf* *p*

Vln. II *p* *mf* *p*

Vla. *p* *mf* *p*

Vc. *p* *mf* *p*

Vln. I *pizz.* *p*

Vln. II *pizz.* *p*

Vla. *pizz.* *p*

Vc. *pizz.* *p*

Db. *p*

≡

368 *Piu mosso* *mf*

S. passed. But life is e-ter-nal, Great-er than thou. Like boun-teous rain he

Chorus *Piu mosso* *mf*

Fl. I *mf*

Eng. Hn. *mf*

Vln. I *mf* *tr* *mf*

Vln. II *mf* *tr* *mf*

Vla. *mf*

Vc. *mf*

Vln. I *arco* *mf* *tr* *mf*

Vln. II *arco* *mf* *tr* *mf*

Vla. *arco* *mf* *tr* *mf*

Vc. *arco* *mf* *tr* *mf*

Db. *mf* *pizz.* *arco*

383 *poco accel.*

S. shows his gifts on us Like an o'er-whelm-ing wind he urg-es us on Till time and

S. *mf* *cresc.*

A. *mf* *cresc.*

Fl. I *mf* *cresc.*

Eng. Hn. *mf* *cresc.*

Vln. I *mf* *cresc.*

Vln. II *mf* *cresc.*

Vla. *mf* *cresc.*

Vc. *mf* *cresc.*

Vln. I *mf* *cresc.*

Vln. II *mf* *cresc.*

Vla. *mf* *cresc.*

Vc. *mf* *cresc.*

Db. *mf* *cresc.*

391 *rall.*

S. space are for-got And joy and sor-row are one!

S. *ff*

A. *ff*

Fl. I *ff*

Fl. 2 *ff*

Eng. Hn. *ff*

Vln. I *ff*

Vln. II *ff*

Vla. *ff*

Vc. *ff*

Vln. I *ff*

Vln. II *ff*

Vla. *ff*

Vc. *ff*

Db. *ff*

If this section were scored for large symphonic orchestra, it would be hard not to hear it as an imitation of Wagner. It expresses the emotional climax of the plot, where Sāvitrī convinces death to grant her boon, by explaining that love is the truth that underlies

existence. This change in musical style suggests that when attempting to create growing fervor and extreme emotions in characters, Holst chose to adopt Wagnerian elements because he was unable to achieve enough emotional and dramatic impact from the spare Sanskrit-inspired music of the opening. Whether the adoption of overtly Wagnerian language in this reduced texture was a calculated choice or simply an instinctual reaction to the dramatic situation in light of Wagnerian influence is not clear, and does not change its relationship to other sections of the work that sound distinctly different.

The transition from the bare, recitative-like music of the opening, where we hear Death and Satyavan's associative themes, to the Wagnerian-inspired music of Sāvitri's plea for life is accomplished through what Gwynne has identified as an invoking of the pastoral sound world of Vaughan Williams' *fin-de-siècle* works,<sup>18</sup> using wordless chorus in modal counterpoint to embody the souls that Sāvitri has comforted in her life (mm. 214-253). The meaning and application of the term "pastoral" in the context of early twentieth-century British music is hotly debated, although the aural sound of this music is distinctive, with its modal harmonies, planing fifths, string orchestration, and frequent use of wordless chorus. It is this sound world that Holst seems to be adopting.

The genius of *Sāvitri*, one that indicates a growing independence from the influence of Wagner, is the way Holst moves between these contrasting aural styles almost seamlessly. As in *The Planets* ten years later, Holst shows himself to be a master at juxtaposing diverse influences to create something of his own.

There are, in addition to these considerations of musical style, important philosophical parallels between Wagner and Holst, which are illuminated by the consideration of the Hindu doctrine of *Māyā* in *Sāvitri*. *Māyā* is the Hindu belief that all

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<sup>18</sup> Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940", 93.

existence, including life and death, is illusion, and those who are faithful and meditate can see beyond these limitations to the true meaning of existence. Having probably encountered *Māyā* through his reading of Schopenhauer, Wagner demonstrated his understanding of its power in this remark, recorded by his wife, Cosima:

Prometheus's words "I took knowledge away from Man" came to my mind and gave me a profound insight; knowledge, seeing ahead, is in fact a divine attribute, and Man with this divine attribute is a piteous object. He is like Brahma before the *Māyā* spread before him the veil of ignorance, of deception; the divine privilege is the saddest thing of all.<sup>19</sup>

Schopenhauer saw in Eastern thought a reinforcement of his own pessimistic view of existence where self-denial, or the renunciation of all worldly endeavors, takes on value and is the path to salvation, as Christopher Janaway explains:

...salvation lies in self-denial or self-renunciation. "In fact," he [Schopenhauer] says "nothing can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist." In "denial of the will to life," one turns against the particular manifestation of will to life found in oneself, which means turning against the body, and against one's own individuality. Thus one ceases, as much as possible, to strive for one's own egoistic ends, ceases to avoid suffering or to seek pleasure, ceases to desire propagation of the species, or any sexual gratification— in short, one looks down on that willing part of nature which one is, and withdraws from one's identification with it... Having given up placing any positive value in the human round of happiness and suffering, the willless subject finds a new value in the very rejection of what has ordinary human value.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer refers to the concept of *Māyā*, as here to illustrate the illusion of knowledge:

The *Vedas* and *Puranas* have no better simile than a dream for the whole knowledge of the actual world, which they call the web of *Māyā*, and they use none more frequently.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, eds., *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 435-36.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 110-113.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 4 vols., vol. 1 (London: Trubner and Co., 1886), 21.

*Māyā* is also essential to Schopenhauer's writings that illustrate the experience of individual consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Wagner was initially drawn to Schopenhauer's view that music was the highest of the arts for its ability to express the "what" as opposed to the "why" of reality, and from *Tristan und Isolde* onward,<sup>23</sup> Wagner's music dramas became an attempt to not only portray drama and action in music, but also the representation of "the whole cosmic scheme of things within which humans have their being."<sup>24</sup>

Holst's biography offers no confirmation of his familiarity with the philosophy of Schopenhauer, but as discussed in the previous chapter, the circles in which Holst traveled as a student at the Royal College of Music make feasible his encounter Wagner's prose writings, not to mention Ashton Ellis's articles on Schopenhauer in *The Meister*.

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher Janaway's parsing of Schopenhauer's writings on this point helps to clarify: "From the point of view of the world of representation, governed by space and time which are the principles of individuation, reality consists of separate individuals, of which any moral agent is one. So the person who thinks 'Each individual is a being radically different from all others... everything else is non-I and foreign to me' is right about the world of appearance. But beneath this lies the world as thing in itself, which is not split up into individuals, but just is *the world*— whatever that ultimately is. So the supposedly more profound view is the one which considers individuation to be 'mere phenomenon' rather than ultimately part of reality. From this point of view, no one is distinct from anything else in the world, and so can recognize 'in *another* his own self, his own true inner nature.' Schopenhauer's Indian thoughts come to the fore suddenly: the conception of the world as composed of separate individuals is *Māyā*— 'i.e. illusion, deception, phantasm, mirage,' while knowledge of the deeper, more correct, non-individuating view is expressed in the Sanskrit *tat tvam asi*: this art thou. Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> *Die Meistersinger* is the obvious work that does not seem to fit into Wagner's new fascination with Schopenhauer. However, as Eric Chafe has argued, though Wagner had completed much of the libretto years earlier, he was only able to bring the piece to fruition after accepting the reassessment of all human activity as essentially tragic. He writes: "After his conversion to Schopenhauer and the composition of *Tristan*, Wagner was at last able to realize his intentions for *Die Meistersinger*. What made such a change possible was his acceptance of the tragic character of existence as the bedrock of truth beneath all optimism. Sachs's *Wahn* monologue gives the idea full expression." Eric Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47.

<sup>24</sup> Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy* (London: Allen Lane Penguin Press, 2000), 212. For a discussion of Wagner and Schopenhauer, see Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic*, especially chapter 2 "Tristan and Schopenhauer," also Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy*. John Tietz, *Redemption or Annihilation? Love Versus Power in Wagner's Ring*, ed. E. Allen McCormick, *Studies in European Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).



Raymond Head was the first to point out that Holst introduced *Māyā* into the original story from the *Mahabharata*,<sup>25</sup> but it is not clear if Holst's understanding of *Māyā* is derived from the study of Schopenhauer and Wagner or original Sanskrit sources. In Holst's version of *Sāvitrī*, we learn that both life and death are illusions that obscure the truth of existence: love. After Satyavan returns home and finds Sāvitrī in distress, she tells him that she can see beyond the physical world. Suddenly Satyavan breaks into a long meditation on *Māyā* that seems strangely eloquent (m. 108-134) for a simple woodsman.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 6.5 Satyavan's Explanation of *Māyā*, *Sāvitrī***

Satyavan

But thou art pale and trembling, what ails thee?

Sāvitrī

The forest is to me a mirror wherein I see another world, a world where all is nameless, unknown, all sick with fear.

Satyavan

It is *Māyā*! Dost thou not know her? Illusion, dreams, phantoms. But to the wise, *Māyā* is more, Look around. All that thou see'st Trees and shrubs, The grass at thy feet, All that walks or creeps, All that flies from tree to tree, All is unreal, All is *Māyā*. Our bodies, our limbs, our very thoughts, we ourselves are slaves to *Māyā*. What remaineth? Who can say? Love to the lover, the child to the mother, the song to the singer, God to the worshipper these wand'ring thro' the world of *Māyā* are perchance shadows of that which is.

Sāvitrī

Once I knew *Māyā*, Now she is forgot, Mine eyes are open, would they were shut, I see the heart of ev'ry tree, pale with terror, The elves that dance upon the grass blades crouching earthward Dost thou not feel? Ah! Canst thou not see?

Satyavan

I see nought, what ails thee?

Sāvitrī

He doth come.

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<sup>25</sup> Head, "Holst and India I," 4.

<sup>26</sup> Holst, *Sāvitrī*, 6-10.

Satyavan's sudden eloquence emphasizes the philosophical point of the story: life and death are irrelevant as long as there is love. The rest of the opera is a reflection of this idea.

The musical setting of Satyavan's monologue is significant as Holst took special pains to illustrate musically the influence of *Māyā* with a wordless female chorus that returns each time the influence of *Māyā* is felt. Over this choral accompaniment, Satyavan's vocal part, on the words "It is *Māyā*! Dost thou not know her? Illusion, dreams, phantoms." is chromatic and chant-like, reflecting the fear of Sāvitrī's previous statement. On the phrases, "but to the wise, *Māyā* is more," the music takes on harmonic coherence in A, the same key in which the Death and Satyavan associative themes first appeared. The music is also marked by much enharmonic movement. Each occurrence of the word "*Māyā*" is sung to some chromatic and unexpected harmony, which veils the A tonal center, just as *Māyā* veils the truth of existence. Only once does Satyavan seem to break completely through *Māyā*, and this is when he wonders what might be beyond (Love to the lover, the child to the mother, see figure 6.5). On "God to the Worshipper," there is a sudden dynamically forceful, yet harmonically weak cadence on A, but this moment disappears as Satyavan explains that these things are only guesses.

Satyavan's meditation on *Māyā* is striking when it appears, but it gains even more importance near the end of the work as he awakens from Death, and confidently expresses what lies beyond *Māyā* (m. 487): "Yea, so too was my weariness, *Māyā* had seized me. I was her slave. Now hath she fled. Naught remains but thou and thy love, thou alone art free from *Māyā*, Thou alone art real."<sup>27</sup> With the mention of *Māyā* (m.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

488), the sustained chords of the wordless chorus appear with string tremolos underneath (paralleling mm. 107-112). On the words “thou alone art real” Satyavan confidently achieves the cadence on A, which had eluded him in his first meditation on *Māyā*, early in the opera, signaling his firm understanding of what lay beyond.

By virtue of the love and care she has shown for others, Sāvitrī can see beyond *Māyā*, giving her the ability to sense the presence of Death and interact with him. When she is comforting the stricken Satyavan, her thoughts and words are focused on life, and her music is appropriately modal, but as an ostinato derived from the Death motive begins to appear and build in the orchestra, she recognizes Death’s effects on her surroundings (mm. 176-183) and her music becomes increasingly chromatic. The same transformation comes over the music of Satyavan as he dies on stage, but he is unaware of Death’s presence and of what is happening to him. When chromaticism affects Sāvitrī it is to show that she is aware of Death’s presence, and when he arrives on stage, she can actually see him and speak to him, demonstrating in music her power to see beyond the cloak of *Māyā*.

Her awareness of *Māyā* gives her power over it, allowing her to influence Death. Musically Holst captures this as Sāvitrī is convincing Death to grant her boon. He becomes so enthralled with her understanding of the mysteries of life and death that he grants her wish. At this moment his music is bereft of any hint of the death theme, it is tuneful and almost free of chromaticism (mm. 399-412), so powerful is Sāvitrī’s influence.

Figure 6.6 *Sāvitrī*, measures 398-412

The musical score for measures 398-412 of *Sāvitrī* is presented in a standard orchestral format. It features a vocal line with lyrics and a full orchestral accompaniment. The tempo is marked *Andante* and the dynamics are *ff*. The lyrics are: "Sā - vi - tri - glo - ri - ous wo - man - Take the gift thou hast asked Life is thine in all its full - ness Thine the song, the path of flow'rs." The score includes parts for Bass, Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Alto 1, Alto 2, Flute, English Horn, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The Viola part features a prominent triplet pattern. The vocal line is in a low register, and the instrumental parts provide a rich harmonic and rhythmic texture.

The final mention of *Māyā* comes as Death is leaving. His final line is: “Unto his kingdom Death wendeth alone. One hath conquered him, one knowing life, one free from *Māyā*, *Māyā* who reigns where men dream they are living, whose power extends to that

other world where men dream that they are dead. For even Death is *Māyā*.<sup>28</sup> Death's words suggest that Sāvitrī has taught him the truth of his existence; he is no more reality than is life. The music here is chromatic and laden with Death's associative theme, but the last five words prepare harmonically for the entrance of Sāvitrī with the comfort theme, heard as she departs with Satyavan. Both Satyavan and Death have come to realize their existence is *Māyā*, and with these realizations, the veil is drawn back, leaving at the end the only thing that is real: Sāvitrī and her love.

This long consideration of the treatment of *Māyā* reveals Wagnerian influence in two ways. It reinforces that basic, primal emotion is the point of the story. Only through love was Sāvitrī able to gain the power to see beyond *Māyā*. Her intense love for Satyavan is what compels her to barter with Death, and finally, her explanation of the centrality of love and communion with others inspires such ardor in Death that he impetuously grants her pleas for life, not stopping to consider that this might lead to the return of Satyavan.

It is in Sāvitrī's pleas for life as her boon from Death where the other subtle but important Wagnerian parallel resides. For Schopenhauer, it is platonic love, that is compassion or sympathy, which allows one to overcome *Māyā*'s veil.<sup>29</sup> Sāvitrī's welcoming of Death and his response make clear that the compassion that she has shown for others has led to her ability to see beyond *Māyā*.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 42-3.

<sup>29</sup> Eric Chafe writes of Schopenhauer in this regard: "In his fourth book [of *The World as Will and Representation*] he described as the 'last item in [his] discussion, how love, whose origin and nature we know to be seeing through the *principium individualtionis*, leads to salvation, that is, to the entire surrender of the will-to-live, i.e., of all willing.' Schopenhauer then described the love in question, however, not as sexual desire, but as 'Compassion or sympathy.'" Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic*, 45.

### **Figure 6.7 Sāvitrī's Welcome to Death, *Sāvitrī***

#### Sāvitrī

Welcome Lord, Thou art called the Just One, Thou rulest all by thy decree, Thou callest men together, Thou showest them the path that leads to thine abode, Our only sure possession. Methinks even now thou hast led me thither. Round me I see gentle faces. I hear voices. The air is holy.

#### Death

Thine is the holiness. Thou art enshrouded in thyself. The faces are the sufferers thou hast comforted. The voices are the sweet words thou hast spoken, the air is made holy by thy love. Being with thee is being in Paradise. With thee the gods themselves may dwell.

However, when Sāvitrī asks Death for life she outlines not only platonic love, but also the fruits of sexual love:

Give me life, life is all I ask of thee. 'Tis a song I fain would be singing. Thy song, O Death is a murmur of rest. Mine should be of the joy of striving, where disease hath spread her mantle, where defeat and despair are reigning, there should my song, like a trumpet in battle resound in triumph.... Life is a path I would travel where in flowers should spring up around me, stalwart sons whom I would send where fighting is fiercest. Bright-eyed daughters following my path, carrying life on thro' the ages. Thou, O Death, workest alone. Through thy gate, lonely and desolate man must go. But life is communion. Each one that liveth, liveth for all. Thou art for the moment, a portal soon passed. But life is eternal, greater than thou. Like bounteous rain he showers his gifts on us. Like an overwhelming wind he urges us on until time and space are forgot and joy and sorrow are one!!<sup>30</sup>

Sāvitrī understands the meaning of life as union through love, and the propagation of life in future generations. This is how she tricks Death into returning Satyavan. By asking for life, she implicitly connects the meaning of her own life with that of Satyavan providing her with not only “communion” but also the power to create future generations. Sexual love is essential to the unity in which Sāvitrī renounces her independent will for one joined with Satyavan, and this mirrors the encounter of Tristan and Isolde in Act II of Wagner's music drama where union is elaborated with a strong sexual implication.

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<sup>30</sup> Holst, *Sāvitrī*, 21-29.

Furthermore, Eric Chafe has argued that “Tristan’s reawakening at the center of the act (III) is accompanied by a transformation of the desire music that represents the substance of Wagner’s purported amendment of Schopenhauer— namely, that through sexual love, or desire, one may attain metaphysical understanding leading to pacification of the will and denial of the will-to-life.”<sup>31</sup> Sāvitrī’s pleas for life represent not only Schopenhauer’s understanding of love, but also reflects Wagner’s transformation of Schopenhauer in his works, introducing a physical element that is central to her argument for the life of Satyavan.

*Sāvitrī* is not a final vetting of Wagner from Holst’s music, as has been argued for it, but instead a significant step towards a compositional individuality in which can be found lingering traces of techniques and values learned from the emulation of Wagner. Musically, the spare texture, controlled use of limited resources, ingenious intermingling of associative themes, and stylistic clichés all point toward a uniquely Holstian style. One no longer senses, as in *Sita*, that the emulation of Wagner is the purpose of the work. Instead, Holst is using all of his talent and ability in order to portray not only drama but also the heady philosophic questions that underpinned the simple fable, depicting that love, both emotional and physical, is what leads one beyond the veil of *Māyā*.

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<sup>31</sup> He continues: For Tristan’s curse of the love potion and his own existence in act 3 replaces what had originally been conceived as a curse of love itself, whereas what had originally followed his awakening was centered on *Treu* (loyalty) and *Mitleid* (compassion). In the final form of the act Wagner shifted his focus on the later qualities to an earlier point on the act, placing another Schopenhauerian idea, that of the clairvoyant vision, or *actio in distans*, at the center and making it the outcome of a transformed view of desire. Instead of compassion, Wagner affirms (sexual) love as the key to transcendental change. Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic*, 45.

The thoughtfulness with which these ideas drawn from Hindu philosophy are explored suggests that they reflect deep personal beliefs on the part of Holst.<sup>32</sup> He was a believer in reincarnation, which he alludes to later to Vaughan Williams:

The only point in which I differ from you is about the fear of drifting apart musically or in any other way. I expect it is the result of my old flair for Hindu philosophy and it is difficult to put simply. It concerns the difference between life and death which means that occasionally drifting is necessary [meaning reincarnation] to keep our stock fresh and sweet. It also means a lot more but that's enough for one go.<sup>33</sup>

Holst's understanding and acceptance of death is clearly reflected in the way it is treated in *Sāvītri*, when Sāvītri welcomes Death into her house after he has stricken Satyavan. She is not filled with grief or hatred toward Death, as we might expect.<sup>34</sup> Death is not loss, but simply a regenerating change in state or perception that will eventually be replaced once again by life through reincarnation. Hindu thought also provides an explanation of Holst's seeming ambivalence about getting *Sāvītri* performed. The piece was written without the assurance of performance, and, even after completing the opera, Holst did not work to see a quick premiere. Eight years passed before it was performed, and a further five years before a public staging.<sup>35</sup> Holst's attitude towards performance of his works would recur as the public became disaffected with his more modern compositional style after the success of *The Planets*. He writes in 1926 to Vaughan Williams:

I still believe in the Hindu doctrine of *Dharma*, which is one's path in life. If one is lucky (or maybe unlucky—it doesn't matter) to have a clearly appointed path to which one comes naturally whereas any other one is an unsuccessful effort, one

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<sup>32</sup> The origins of his beliefs in Theosophy have been discussed in chapter 1.

<sup>33</sup> Holst and Vaughan Williams, *Heirs*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> A similar view of death is expressed in Holst's *Ode to Death* (1919).

<sup>35</sup> The first performance of *Sāvītri* occurred on 5 December 1916 performed by the London School of Opera, Wellington Hall, St. John's Wood. The first public performance was 23 June 1921 at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith



ought to stick to the former. And I am oriental enough to believe in doing so without worrying about the ‘fruits of action,’ that is, success or otherwise. It applies to certain elementary school teachers I have met as well as to Bach. Of course in an emergency one has to throw all this overboard but I fear I only do so at the last moment. And if I don’t— if I try and think things out carefully and calmly— I am always wrong. This has happened so often that I am convinced that *Dharma* is the only thing for me. This is all first person singular but that cannot be helped. I suppose it is really a confession.<sup>36</sup>

Holst’s acceptance of Eastern philosophy is also reflected in the seriousness with which the ideas and beliefs in *Sāvitrī* are explored. *Sāvitrī* is not simply the dramatization of a story based on some foreign philosophy, but a concentrated exegesis of personal beliefs, not unlike Wagner’s early music dramas in relation to *Oper und Drama*.

The reason for such an expression of beliefs may have been the result of the birth of Imogen shortly before he composed *Sāvitrī*. Perhaps the story expresses Holst’s new understanding of love and the meaning of life in light of the birth of his daughter, that while comradeship is central to life’s meaning, so too is intimate love, and the children that are often its fruits. In this way, we may have Imogen alone to thank for the creation of *Sāvitrī*.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 63.

## Chapter VII

### “Pitch’d betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross”: The Expectations of National Opera and Employment of Popular Traditions in *The Perfect Fool*

Holst’s next opera, *The Perfect Fool*,<sup>1</sup> completes the trio of operas connected to the period 1906-1908, in which he worked through his emulation of Wagner. Here Holst parodies what he once revered, making fun of Wagner’s music, libretti, and characters demonstrating that even as early as 1906, Holst was able to treat Wagner humorously, and not just with blind reverence. *The Perfect Fool*’s conception is important, but the work’s long gestation from 1906 to 1923 renders it secondary to the influence of popular indigenous theatre. Rather than follow Wagnerian models in *The Perfect Fool*, Holst seems to draw from the long tradition of British comedic entertainment including ballad opera, pantomime, music hall, and variety. From these, he constructs a satire of the clichés of continental grand opera.

Holst scholarship has ignored the curiosities of the opera’s compositional genesis in favor of questions of allegorical meaning raised by critics after its premiere. In a detailed musical analysis tinged with embarrassment, Imogen dismisses the work for its

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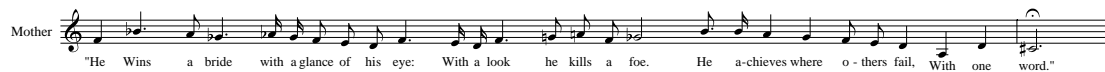
<sup>1</sup> The quotation in the chapter title is from a poem by Francis Thompson, which Richard Capell cited to describe Holst’s musical style: “Apparently, he has both feet solidly enough on terra firma. But from some of his music; the opera *Sāvitrī*, *Rig Veda hymns*, *Ave Maria*, and *The Hymn of Jesus*, you perceive not so, but that one, in truth, is on a rung of that ladder of shining traffic told of in Francis Thompson’s poem—‘Pitch’d betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.’” (Richard Capell, “A Milton of Music,” *Daily Mail*, 1 February 1922.)

eccentricities,<sup>2</sup> obscuring *The Perfect Fool's* connection to *Sita* and *Sāvitri*, as well as the impact that many interim projects may have had on its development.

*The Perfect Fool* calls for large symphony orchestra, chorus, six principals, and one actor, who plays the mute Fool. As he did with his previous two operas, Holst wrote his own libretto, but not before asking both his amanuensis Jane Joseph and his friend Clifford Bax to write it. Both declined.<sup>3</sup> The opera is in one act, lasting about one hour and fifteen minutes. It opens with ballets for the earth, water, and fire spirits, which a Wizard invokes to create a potion. After this, the opera can be divided into three sections, the meeting of the Mother and the Wizard, the Wooing Song competition, and the return and defeat of the Wizard.

The first of these sections is a slapstick scene between the Wizard and the Mother, who is hiding her son, the Fool. She proclaims a prophecy told to her at his birth.

**Figure 7.1 Fool's Prophecy, *The Perfect Fool*, measures 325-6**



The Wizard then explains to the Mother that the potion he has brewed is in all physical qualities exactly like water, but if drunk by a man, the first woman he sees will fall madly in love with him and the first man he sees will be burned to death. Using the potion, the Wizard intends to enchant a Princess (who just happens to be in the vicinity looking for a husband) so that he may fulfill the following ancient prophecy about her.

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<sup>2</sup> Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 53-7.

<sup>3</sup> As Michael Short relates: "At first he had asked Jane Joseph if she would undertake the task ('being my old pupil she won't take offence if I tell her that it won't do.' He confided to Isobel [his wife]), but it is not clear whether she [Joseph] actually started work on the project. 'After trying for a long time, I have taught myself to feel what is wanted in a libretto,' Holst remarked, 'You have two distinct jobs in the words: 1) to make the situation clear, as simply as possible, 2) having done so, to rub it in. But the libretto of the Fool wants a light touch, and I find I haven't one.' He next turned to Clifford Bax, who declined on the grounds that he was unable to find the plot as amusing as the composer evidently imagined it to be, and at this stage Holst decided to write the words himself." Short, *Gustav Holst*, 177.

**Figure 7.2 Princess's Prophecy, *The Perfect Fool*, measures 417-20**



He then practices his wooing song for the Mother, and after this instructs her to stand guard while he sleeps. Following this, three unnamed girls briefly enter to fetch water from the well,<sup>4</sup> and this sets the Mother to action. She takes the chalice and feeds the potion to her son, replacing it with water.

The appearance of the Princess and her entourage signals the beginning of the next section, the Wooing Song competition. She reiterates her prophecy (I must marry the man who does the deed no other can do) and laments that every man who sees her wants her as his bride. The Wizard begins to court the Princess, who is not impressed. He then triumphantly drinks the water in the cup, thinking it to be his potion and sings his wooing song, which fails miserably. Realizing the Mother's treachery, he escapes, to much mockery from the Princess and her attendants, promising to return and exact revenge.

Another suitor then appears, the Troubadour, who sings in a style indebted to nineteenth-century Italian opera. He begins his wooing song, of which the vocal line seems to be a parody of the drinking chorus in Act I of Verdi's *La Traviata*.

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<sup>4</sup> There was almost universal praise for the beauty of this moment in the reviews for this musical interlude, which acts as a transition from the first to the second section of the opera. See Arnold Bennett, "Gustav Holst's *The Perfect Fool*," *The Adelphi* 1, June (1923); Edwin Evans, "Opera in London," *The Musical Times*, 1 June (1923); Donald Francis Tovey, "The Perfect Fool; or, The Perfect Opera," *The Nation and the Athenaeum* 33, 26 May (1923). Long before this opera Holst had established his particular talent for composing music for women's voices in works such as the *Hymns from the Rig Veda* and *Six Choruses from 'The Princess.'* The passage in question is a strikingly beautiful unaccompanied round for female voices.

### 7.3 Troubadour's Wooing Song (excerpt), *The Perfect Fool*, measures 834-51

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system is for the Troubadour (T.) and Piano (Pno.). The Troubadour's part is in the treble clef, and the Piano accompaniment is in the bass clef. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto' and the dynamics are 'mp' and 'p'. The lyrics for the first system are: "From far-off land I come, A land of vine and o-live tree: A land where men are sing-ing Songs of love, all day. Men have told the tale of thy great and won-drous beau-ty; I have come to". The second system continues the lyrics: "woo thee. To claim thee as my bride." The third system shows the end of the piece with a double bar line.

To end his wooing song the Troubadour attempts a passage of vocal virtuosity, and is unable to sing the required high note. In response, the Princess displays her own vocal skill and easily surpasses him, dismissing him with the words: “Sir, I bid you farewell! Go home and learn to sing better; your voice will never win me.”

On the heels of this rebuff appears a third suitor, the mysterious and musically Wagnerian, Traveller, a burlesque of Wotan’s disguise as the Wanderer in *Siegfried*. He immediately launches into his wooing song, which commences with a bowdlerized version of the opening of *Tristan und Isolde*.

## 7.4 Traveller's Wooing Song (excerpt), *The Perfect Fool*, measures 896-939

**Andante maestoso**

Traveller

Piano

**Andante maestoso**

*f*

*p*

12 **molto pesante sempre *ff*** **Moderato**

T. Hail thee, high-born! Ho - li-est hap-pi-ness, Whole-som-est health Dwell with thee dai-ly!

Pno. *f* *p*

21

T. Thy high flaunt-ed fame hath been flung to my far - off

Pno.

30

T. home. Brought here by thy beau - ty, Which burn - eth my

Pno. *cresc.*

37

T. bo - som, I beg thee in boun - ty My Bride to

Pno. *accel. e cresc.* *ff* *colla voce*

45 **A tempo**

Princess

T. But, Sir... I think we have heard this be - fore. *ff*

Pno. *ff* **A tempo**

Nay, Nay, O Nay, Nois - i-est ne-ga - tive!

The Princess's wry comment set to the horn motif from Wagner's *Siegfried*: “But, Sir, I think we have heard this before,” cuts him off. The Traveller wildly denies this charge in his characteristic Wagnerian alliteration: “Nay, Nay, O Nay, Noisiest negative! Highest

harrowing Frightfulness frantic!” He trips over and awakens the sleeping Fool who gazes upon the Princess, enchanting her. Seeing the Princess’s newfound affection for the Fool, the Troubadour and the Traveller wildly vow revenge against him, in a comic call-and-answer with the chorus.

The final section of the opera commences with the unexpected entrance of a Shepherd with news that the Wizard is approaching with spirits of fire to revenge himself on the Princess and her people. Here parody gives way to theatrical and musical spectacle as the peasants prepare to defend their Princess against the Wizard and fire spirits. The enchantment of the potion renders her unconcerned by all of this and content to sit beside the Fool. Subjects of the Princess, probably from the surrounding countryside, begin to cross the stage, fleeing from the approaching flames. The Mother says her sleeping son will face the danger, and once again reiterates the prophecy made at his birth. At the last second, those who had been preparing to attack the Wizard and fire spirits flee in fear, leaving only Princess, sleeping Fool, and Mother. As the Wizard appears onstage with the fire spirits, the Mother awakens the Fool, forcing him to look upon the Wizard. The potion takes effect with the Fool’s first glance, whereupon the fire spirits turn back and destroy the Wizard.

Holst sets the return of the peasants baffled by the disappearance of the fire as what could be a parody of the entrance of Lohengrin on a white swan, where the a cappella choir splits into eight parts describing the scene.<sup>5</sup> In *The Perfect Fool*, however, the choir, sing an a cappella fugue of interlocking fragments, describing their incredulity and shock at the disappearance of the Wizard.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Wagner, *Lohengrin* (New York: Dover, 1982), 46-7.

## 7.5 The Perfect Fool, measures 1236-51

*Andante*

SOPRANO  
ALTO  
TENOR  
BASS

Where is the fire? Where are the de-mons? Who is dead? Who have es- caped? The Wi-zard is burnt! There lies his hat!

Where is the fire? Where are the de-mons? Who is dead? Who have es- caped? The Wi-zard is burnt! There lies his hat! But he was their lea-der, Sowhy did they burn him?

dead? Who have es- caped? The Wi-zard is burnt! There lies his hat! But he was their lea-der, Sowhy did they

But he was their lea-der, Sowhy did they burn him? Why is that Fool star- ing?

Where is the fire? Where are the de-mons? Who is dead? Who have es- caped? The Wi-zard is

The Wi-zard is burnt! There lies his hat! But he was their lea-der, So why did they burn him?

burn him? Why is that Fool star- ing? Sh! See!

Sh! See! She is there Our Prin- cess! Where is the fire?

burnt! There lies his hat! But he was their lea-der, So why did they burn him? Sh! Sh!

Why is that Fool star- ing? Sh! Sh!

She is there Our Prin- cess! But he was their lea-der, So why

Where are the de- mons? Who is dead? Who have es- caped? But he was their lea-der, So why did they burn

The Princess explains to the crowd that the Fool saved her and pleads with him for a profession of love. She asks three times, each time more insistently. The third time the Fool answers with his only word in the entire work, “NO!” The crowd is appalled that



the Fool would rebuff their beautiful Princess. The Mother rebukes them explaining that with one word, the Fool has fulfilled both his and the Princess's prophecies: "Put up your swords and listen; for I have one more thing to say: both the legends have come true. He has achieved where others failed, with one word. For he is the only man who has ever looked in your (Princess) face and not loved you!" The crowd celebrates the fulfillment of the prophecies and prepares for the immediate wedding of the Fool and the Princess, ignoring that he has refused to marry her. The ceremony begins and the priest is just about to crown the Fool, who yawns twice and falls asleep, to the embarrassment of all.

The British National Opera Company published a small guide to the opera after its initial run, which gives an almost complete outline of the work's genesis:

Holst spent no fewer than fourteen years in the writing [of *The Perfect Fool*]. The actual conception was the inspiration of a moment. The scenario was written, completed, within a couple of hours. That was upon an August afternoon in 1908. A week later some trifling additions were made. It was then put aside, pondered over, for just ten years, when it was rewritten. In 1920 the words were written and the music was composed. The following year much was again re-written. In 1922-23 the opera stood completed.<sup>6</sup>

A letter Holst wrote in 1920 dates the conception of *The Perfect Fool* in 1906, and refers to it as his "comic opera on *Parsifal*" which seems to suggest that Wagner was the initial inspiration for *The Perfect Fool*.<sup>7</sup> There are a myriad of Wagnerian allusions throughout the plot and the music, apart from the Traveller who in character, word, and music presents a direct parallel to Wotan disguised as the Wanderer in Wagner's *Siegfried*. The centrality of the love potion brings to mind *Tristan and Isolde*, while the prophecies regarding the Princess and the Fool are reminiscent of *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *the Ring*, and *Parsifal*.

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Corbett Smith and Gustav Holst, *The Perfect Fool*, *National Opera Handbooks Vol. 11* (London: British National Opera Company, 1923), 30.

<sup>7</sup> Short, ed., *Gustav Holst, Letters to W. G. Whittaker*, 62.

The characters themselves can be understood as parodies of Wagnerian roles. The Princess seems a combination of Elsa, in her need for a champion; Isolde, in her deep unquestioning love for the Fool, brought about by a love potion; and Eva, in that her future is decided in a song contest, not to mention Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, for whom the assembled minstrels vie for the most eloquent expression of love in their songs. Likewise, the Shepherd seems akin to the Shepherd of Act III of *Tristan*. The Fool, the opera's Parsifal, is the perfect embodiment of the Schopenhaurian denial of the will to life in his refusal to act in anyway to save his own life or others, or to fulfill the prophecy. These concerns are left to the Mother. Parsifal's mother is never seen on stage in Wagner's music drama, but she is invoked by Kundry who recounts her suffering and death at the loss of her son. Later Kundry uses memories of Parsifal's mother in an attempt to seduce him. These awaken a new strength that he uses to resist Kundry and defeat Klingsor. In *The Perfect Fool*, the Mother is the protagonist, where the memories of Parsifal's Mother spurred him towards redemption; the Fool's Mother must physically force him to fulfill his prophecy. The villainous Wizard is, in the most general sense, the Klingsor of the plot. His utter incompetence with women, demonstrated in his interaction with the Mother and the Princess, echoes Klingsor's chastity.

The allusions to Wagner found in *The Perfect Fool* are mostly blunt and unambiguous, and demonstrate Holst's ability to see Wagner and his works in a more equivocal light. However, these allusions are not exhaustive, and do little to explain the format and tone of the work. There was very little precedent in grand opera for a piece that openly mocked other operatic composers. However, such satire had a long and storied history on the British popular stage. Perhaps the most enduring of such works was

the eighteenth-century Ballad opera by John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*. Premiered in 1728, *The Beggar's Opera* was both a satire of a prominent politician of the day, Robert Walpole, and of the aristocratic taste for Italian opera. The work moves between spoken texts and bowdlerized songs taken from other works, and often reworked to comedic effect. *The Beggar's Opera* was very much a singular occurrence, and did not inspire a direct tradition of similar works; however, the satirical streak that it embodied can be found in the nineteenth-century in music hall and in operatic burlesques.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in 1920, the year Holst returned to work on *The Perfect Fool*, a new production of *The Beggar's Opera* opened in Hammersmith where Holst lived, directed by and featuring his friend, Frederic Austin. Given these circumstances, it seems likely that Holst saw *The Beggar's Opera*.

Victorian operatic burlesque was a nineteenth-century genre that, like *The Perfect Fool*, satirized continental grand opera. It consisted of “numbers [which] were appropriated from the model [usually a continental opera popular at the time], with new words and often with humorous touches; additional numbers were interpolated from a variety of familiar sources (such as music hall and minstrel songs). Rarely, however, was there any attempt at musical parody.”<sup>9</sup> Victorian operatic burlesque was transformed by W.S. Gilbert<sup>10</sup> who led “the evolution of the genre into the more sophisticated Savoy-style comic opera, characterized by original stories, absurdity regulated by internal

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<sup>8</sup> For a complete survey of the Burlesque tradition, including *The Beggar's Opera* and Victorian operatic burlesque, as well as consideration of the spoken play tradition of burlesque in England, including playwrights such as Henry Fielding, Richard Sheridan and George Canning, see Clinton-Baddeley, *The Burlesque Tradition in the English Theatre after 1660* (London: Methuen, 1952).

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Woodbridge Wilson and Deane Root: 'Burlesque', Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed 1 November 2006 <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>>

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert's impeccable operatic burlesque credentials consisted of *Dulcamara, or The Little Duck and the Great Quack* (1866), a burlesque of Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, *La Vivandiere or True to the Corps* (1867), a parody of *The Daughter of the Regiment*, and *Robert the Devil or The Nun, the Dun, and the Son of a Gun* (1868), a burlesque of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*.

consistency, satire in place of parody, the absence of travesty and clowning, close directorial supervision and highly developed musical scores.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Victorian operatic burlesque, the Savoy operas did not parody the plot and libretto of an established opera. Rather, they were original satires on elements of British culture and society that occasionally parodied the words and music of grand opera.<sup>12</sup>

Early in his life, Holst was much taken by the Savoy operas, and composed a satirical work poking fun at upper class Cheltenham called *Lansdown Castle* (discussed in chapter 2), as well as an opera for children in the Savoy style called *The Idea* (1898), the plot of which centers around the Prime Minister of an unnamed country having his first ever original idea, and the hilarity that ensues as a result.

Victorian operatic burlesque and, by extension, the Savoy operas, grew out of Victorian music hall, the dominant form of nineteenth-century British popular entertainment.<sup>13</sup> The nature and development of music hall throughout the nineteenth-century is far too large a topic for consideration in this study, but by the turn of the twentieth-century, Victorian music hall was being transformed by economic forces that sought to expand its appeal to the middle and upper classes. This transformation, which sought to create an air of “respectability” that was thought lacking, led to what is commonly referred to as variety theatre.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Victorian music hall, there was

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson and Root: ‘Burlesque.’

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert and Sullivan parody the vocal stylings of bel canto in “Poor Wandering One” from *The Pirates of Penzance* and lampoon the “Wolf’s Glen Scene” from Weber’s *Der Freischütz* in the incantation scene of *The Sorcerer*, to name two examples.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Bailey, *Music Hall and the Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), viii-xxi.

<sup>14</sup> This is a complicated transformation which has yet to be fully studied and mapped. Jacky Bratton, however, a pioneering scholar of the music halls makes this attempt to describe music hall and how it became variety: “The music hall is a specially Victorian institution.... Its heyday was roughly from 1890 to 1910.... Signs of the end were the 1907 performers’ strike and the 1912 Royal Command performance. During the period huge success attended the transformation of a multitude of small-scale entertainments

less emphasis on racy innuendo and sexual humor, and more emphasis on slapstick comedy in hopes of appealing to more respectable clientele, especially families.<sup>15</sup> Like Victorian music hall, variety was incredibly responsive to the newest fads in popular music including ragtime from the United States, and revue from France.<sup>16</sup>

There is no evidence that Holst ever attended a music or variety hall, but in 1918 he participated in the creation of a work that was very much indebted to these traditions, called *English Opera as She is Wrote*. This work is important to the current study because it is in many ways a forerunner to *The Perfect Fool*. *English Opera as She is Wrote* was not an “opera,” but a concatenation of six largely self-contained scenes tied together by the thinnest of plots, reflective of the waning tradition of operatic burlesque, and also the revue format that was gaining popularity in variety theatres at the time.<sup>17</sup> Each of the six

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presided over by pub proprietors and semi-professional chairmen into seriously capitalized big business that operated according to increasingly strictly enforced and eventually overdetermining rules. At first the growth of the halls provided a leisure service to growing urban populations, and enabled talented individuals to develop star careers and fortunes. Cultural change and aspiration, the broadening of the audience to include more segments of late-Victorian society, and concomitant moves to increase discipline and market control shifted power into the hands of business managers and investors. They spent venture capital on very large and sumptuously appointed auditoria laid out as theatres rather than ‘halls,’ transforming the audience/performer relationship; and they protected their investments, via censorship of material and the contractual disciplining of performers to strict time limits on stage, and bound them to work more or less on demand for the contracting syndicate, while forbidding appearances elsewhere. The transformation resulted not only in the shifting character of the large halls themselves, as they developed into ‘variety theatres,’ but also the suppression of small independent halls; it eventually deracinated an institution which then failed to meet the challenge of further developments in the leisure industries. J. S. Bratton, “The Music Hall,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 164.

<sup>15</sup> The tawdriness of music hall did not disappear completely, but it became the exception, not the rule in variety. One thinks of the process in the 1990s (perhaps even earlier) in the United States where Las Vegas was recast as a family destination in which its traditional more adult attractions were toned down, but did not disappear. For more information on the transformation of the content of shows as Victorian music hall became variety see Lois Rutherford, “‘Harmless Nonsense:’ the Comic Sketch and the Development of Music-Hall Entertainment,” in *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, ed. J. S. Bratton (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Dave Russell, “Varieties of Life: The Making of the Edwardian Music Hall,” in *The Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68-71.

<sup>17</sup> Dave Russell, a historian of British popular music of this time writes: “from 1912... it became a central part of variety entertainment throughout Britain. Revues from this date were generally collections of song and dance routines held together by plots that barely hinted at a unifying theme. The satirical element was

‘acts’ were a satire on a different operatic style, beginning with Balfe, then Verdi, Wagner, Debussy, and Rimsky Korsakov.<sup>18</sup> The five were then followed by an epilogue, titled “the consummation (devoutly to be wished— over)” which proposed to introduce the audience to the future of British opera.

*English Opera as She is Wrote* was first produced on 9 March 1918 at Morley College. The only manuscript materials that remain from this piece are fragments from the instrumental parts. A notice and a review, in the same satirical spirit as the production, were published in *Morley College Magazine*. The notice lampooned the prose writings of Richard Wagner on the subject of Beethoven:

Never since Beethoven’s “Ninth” has a composer so consciously felt himself at the parting of the ways; never has the Music of the Past been swept aside with such a magnificent gesture— albeit a gesture not of contempt but of sympathy and appreciation— to clear the way for the Music of the Future.

For just as Beethoven gives us three movements of wondrous beauty, then passes them in review only to dismiss them as inadequate to express the height and depth and fullness of his final message, so our composer has boldly written his first five acts in the five great styles of his predecessors in operatic tradition, reserving the overwhelming revelation of his own New Tradition for his sixth and last act.

With regard to the work itself, it may be said that under it lies the profound conception of the Unity behind Divinity, of the One behind the Many, of the Something in the Everything (vide “A Critique of Pure Kant”). It shows us the “Woman-Soul under many manifestations and in many settings, yet always in essence the same.”<sup>19</sup>

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strong, but it tended to be directed at theatrical trends far more than contemporary social or political issues.” *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> The Rimsky-Korsakov act was cut for the performance at the Ashburton Hall, and may have been cut in other performances. It was probably originally included as because of the success of Rimsky Korsakov’s *Le coq d’or* which Dyagilev staged in London and Paris in 1914, but the reference was perhaps lost on some audiences.

<sup>19</sup> The Wagnerian section of this critique includes two long quotations perhaps written by Holst, one about the use of leitmotifs, and the other about the underlying philosophy of the act. If these are truly written by Holst, then they are clear indications that by 1918, he had an understanding of what Wagner was attempting in his leitmotifs, and that Holst had at least superficially encountered the Philosophy of Schopenhauer. Alan Gibbs contends that these quotations were written by Jane Joseph, citing an undocumented letter from Joseph to her brother Edwin (Gibbs, *Holst among Friends*, 35.). The quotations read: “The music is built out of an indefinite number of motives, light and dark. There is one for every mood of every character. Thus there is Screamhild sleepy, Screamhild very sleepy, Screamhild just on the point of going to sleep, Screamhild asleep—the last mostly consisting solely of a low C throbbled out by the basses... The essence of

The nature of the sixth act, in which the future of opera was revealed, is not clear. The preview explains it thus: “Before the final act the mind reels and staggers. No words can do it justice. The loftiness of its conception and the masterly manner of its execution leave one spellbound and speechless.”<sup>20</sup> The absurdity of these pronouncements probably hints at the general tone of the work, which connects it very much with the popular traditions of variety and Victorian operatic burlesque, not to mention Wagnerian verbal hyperbole.

A review of the first act of *English Opera as She is Wrote*, which lampoons Michael Balfe, British composer of *The Bohemian Girl*, raises the possibility that Holst reused material from the Balfe parody of *English Opera as She is Wrote* in *The Perfect Fool*:

I see a girl and two lovers, full of hatred, I hear a chorus enthusiastically declaiming that she shall be mine (the individual character’s, you will understand, not actually mine, the bewildered critic’s), I hear strains strangely familiar: Balfe was it not, or Wallace, or Sir Julius [Benedict]...and I hear, yes, upon my word, I hear the male voices in desperate imitation, and with those very pump-handling gestures so dear to our good old choruses, and I shut my eyes feeling all the time very very young. I went back, in fact, to my childhood, when the remembrances of those good old days were still a living tradition.<sup>21</sup>

The quotation admits the possibility that the chorus of retainers, to the call and response of “she shall be mine— she shall be thine,” which occurs after the Troubadour and Traveller have sung their wooing songs in *The Perfect Fool*, and which has been

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life is that entity has no substance. Conceive then a soul seeking to combine pure ineffable mind with gross material substance, and at once we are confronted with an impossible task. But what is the nature of the Impossible? The Possible partakes of the nature of indispensable illumination, and can be attained at the cost of Free Will only with an infinite amount of subconscious effort. It is the idea of Infinity that I wish to show by my drama; effort must be brought out by the brass, the impossible by the strings. The relation of Time to Eternity is obvious, for I have disregarded the former, and the whole drama suggests the latter. Jane Joseph, “English Opera as She Is Wrote,” *Morley College Magazine* 27, no. 6, 1918): 77-8.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph, “English Opera as She Is Wrote,” 79.

<sup>21</sup> L Dunton Green, “Opera as She Is Wrote,” *Morley College Magazine* 1918, 90.

identified as a parody of early Italian opera,<sup>22</sup> may indeed be drawn from the English ballad opera parodies in Act 1 of *English Opera as She is Wrote*, but with only fragments of the orchestral parts remaining, this is necessarily conjecture.

**Figure 7.6** *The Perfect Fool*, measures 998-1004

The musical score for measures 998-1004 of *The Perfect Fool* is presented in three systems. The first system includes parts for Troubadour (soprano), Retainers (bass), and Piano. The Troubadour part has lyrics "She shall be mine" and a performance instruction "(interrupting the Traveller)". The Retainers part has lyrics "She shall be thine" and a performance instruction "(becoming conventionally agitated)". The Piano part is marked "p". The second and third systems feature Tenor (T.) and Bass (B.) parts with lyrics "She shall be mine" and "She shall be thine", and a Piano (Pno.) part.

There may be other instances where musical material from *English Opera as She is Wrote* was used in *The Perfect Fool*, although this will not be clear without additional evidence.

<sup>22</sup> Attribution of this music to the Verdi section of *English Opera as She is Wrote* by commentators such as Imogen Holst, Michael Short, and Jon Mitchell, stems from a letter Holst wrote to W. G. Whittaker: "I am... sending the Mag: containing (mis)information about last Saturday... I think I shall send you the Morley Early Victorian version of the Keel Row— Adagio con molto espressione con molto coloratura con molto modulations— it's a scream. So was the Italian finale— 3 soloists singing tonic sol-fa and the brigands shouting 'Away away she shall be mine' for 15 minutes. Short, ed., *Gustav Holst, Letters to W. G. Whittaker*, 39-40. The close stylistic affinity between the operatic styles of Balfe and Rossini may explain the confusion. They were good friends, and most of Balfe's early career was spent in Italy singing Rossini and other Italian opera.



*English Opera as She is Wrote* proved so popular that it was performed again on 13 April at Morley, “and was even exported to Saint Paul’s Girls School, the village of Thaxted, and the Ashburton Hall in Central London.”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, this work can be considered one of Holst’s first stage successes as at this time *Sita* lay in manuscript never to be performed, and *Sāvitrī* had yet to be performed.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Holst’s accomplishment with satire emboldened him to return to his scenario for a burlesque of *Parsifal* written ten years earlier, and to widen the purview of its satire to encompass grand opera in general.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, as in *English Opera as She is Wrote*, Holst also decided to write an opera indebted to British popular genres, satirizing, just as Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* and Victorian operatic burlesque, the British opera going audience’s taste for foreign opera. As usual, Holst never commented, but a consideration of *The Perfect Fool* in light of popular genres reveals intriguing parallels in the overall tone and idiosyncratic form.

Like *English Opera as She is Wrote*, *The Perfect Fool* shares an absurdist, farcical style much like that found in the comedic sketches and songs of the variety theatre of the day.<sup>26</sup> An important difference, is that such songs rarely had fantastic settings, but were rooted in the events of everyday life.<sup>27</sup> There is, however, a British genre of theatre rooted in the fantastic whose comedy is even more radically absurd than found in the variety hall: pantomime. Pantomime, or ‘panto’ as it came to be called, can be traced

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<sup>23</sup> Gibbs, *Holst among Friends*, 35. The Ashburton Hall performance was for the London chapter of the Countryside Holidays Association Rambling Club.

<sup>24</sup> Earlier operatic attempts, *The Revoke* and *The Youth’s Choice*, were never performed. One has to go all the way back to his Cheltenham years to find a Holst opera, *Lansdown Castle*, which had been performed in public.

<sup>25</sup> According to the British National Opera Company Guide for *The Perfect Fool*, Holst returned to *The Perfect Fool* scenario he had written in 1908 and rewrote it. See Smith and Holst, *The Perfect Fool*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion and analysis of the humor of the comic sketch in late Victorian music hall and variety theatre, and its role in the transformation of music hall into variety see Rutherford, “‘Harmless Nonsense:’ the Comic Sketch and the Development of Music-Hall Entertainment,” 131-151.

<sup>27</sup> Bratton, “The Music Hall,” 171-180.

back hundreds of years to *commedia del arte* traditions. By the turn of the twentieth-century it had developed a certain format, style, and season. By that time pantomimes were only performed around Christmas and New Years, were based on fairytales or other fantastic stories, were geared toward children with light and farcical humor, and on the surface were straightforward, though often with an element of double *entendrà* to entertain the adults. The music was a pastiche of popular melodies, tunes culled from other works, including opera, and newly written pieces.<sup>28</sup>

There are parallels to pantomime in the fantastic setting, and tongue-in-cheek humor of *The Perfect Fool*, though it lacks the requisite cross-dressing, and hackneyed traditions (such as the villain always entering from the left, the hero from the right). Holst himself was not a stranger to the fantastic traditions of pantomime, having written incidental music for a pantomime-like play written by his friend Clifford Bax in 1918.<sup>29</sup> Parts of this music would form the basis of the ballets that commence *The Perfect Fool*.

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<sup>28</sup> The history of pantomime in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has not, as yet, received a great amount of scholarly attention. For one of the only comprehensive studies on the topic, see Gerald Frow, *'Oh, Yes It Is!' a History of Pantomime* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> It is not clear if this play was a traditional *pantomime* or a fantasy play with *pantomime* elements. It was premiered on 9 June 1918, at the Royal Court Theatre. The date places it outside the traditional *pantomime* season. A review gives a scenario for the work as well as some critical commentary: "The Sneezing Charm, the action which takes place in and near Baghdad, and the atmosphere of which is the atmosphere of eunuchs and court poets, is a play about a talisman against sneezing. This talisman is much prized by the Kaliff who holds it undignified that a man of his rank and worth should demean himself by sneezing like the common herd. Consequently, when the charm is stolen from him he sets the city agog to catch the thief, on whose head he threatens condign [appropriate] punishment. Such a Kaliff should, we think, be treated as a figure of fun; the King in *Coq d'Or* is his natural brother; and Mr. Bax has, we feel, made a mistake in omitting to deprive his Kaliff of every vestige of dignity. Mr. Roy Byford, who was amusing as a Court Poet would have been still more amusing as Kaliff we imagine, and a vein of humour which sometimes strikes as a trifle tenuous and childish, might then have been redeemed by satire. The play is full of entertaining devices. At first nobody wants the talisman, and everybody gets it. Then everybody wants the talisman and nobody can find it. This is well conceived. There is a conspiracy against the Kaliff. Everyone is in on it and everyone privately arranges to denounce his fellow-conspirators to the Kaliff at the crucial moment. This, again, is well conceived. But the conception is better than the execution, which, in most cases, is always hurrying over important points, and reduces climaxes to the value of mere incidents. A more leisurely development would have enhanced this play a hundredfold.... The music, especially written by Mr. Gustav Von Holst, was first rate." Anon., "First Nights of the Week: 'The Sneezing Ch'rm'," *The Era*, 12 June (1916): 13.

The influence of popular genres is most keenly felt in the first section of *The Perfect Fool*, where the Mother, Fool, and Wizard meet and spar, and the Wizard practices his wooing song. This section contains sudden and brief alternations between speaking and singing, an element that is, as the British National Opera Company guide observes:

A... unique feature in the opera... Where, in the composer's opinion, a character can express himself or herself more effectively in speech than in song then he speaks. Or, to put it another way, where the addition of music is considered unsuitable to any particular words then those words are spoken. And this may happen even in the middle of a sentence. As an example. The Mother calls to the Fool, "Waken, waken! And keep awake." Here, the first two words are sung and the last three are spoken.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 7.7** *The Perfect Fool*, measures 343-346

The musical score for measures 343-346 of *The Perfect Fool* is presented in two staves. The top staff is for the Mother, and the bottom staff is for the Piano. Both parts are marked *Animato*. The Mother's part begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics "(she goes to him and shakes him) Wak - - en, wak - - en And keep a - wake!". The piano accompaniment provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4.

This aspect of the opera came in for particular condemnation from Imogen: "It is these conversational remarks that make the opera unendurable,"<sup>31</sup> and some reviewers of the time agreed, *The Times* critic noting: "Sometimes the characters drop out of music into speech (not always very happily)."<sup>32</sup> The effect is not unlike the "business" often found in the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, such as the song of the Major General in *The Pirates of Penzance* in which, at the end of each verse, he ceases singing in order to struggle to complete his rhyme. Such interpolations were also common during comic songs or skits in variety halls or in pantomime, where the performers would drop out of

<sup>30</sup> In previous English models, speaking and singing alternated in discrete sections. (aria-dialogue-aria, etc) In *The Perfect Fool* singing sometimes suddenly gives way to a phrase or even a word in speech, and then singing recommences. Smith and Holst, *The Perfect Fool*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Anon., "The Perfect Fool," *The Times*, 15 May 1923.

singing to make a comic observation, sometimes directed at the audience, sometimes rhetorical. Unlike these mostly improvised interpolations, Holst's were written into the fabric of the score.

As soon as the Princess arrives, signaling the beginning of the prize song section, the humor becomes slightly more "elevated," and the music almost a continuous fabric of more traditional alternation of recitative and aria.

One first night reviewer who noticed the influence of traditional English genres on *The Perfect Fool* was the German critic, Alfred Einstein. He began by drawing connections between Holst's opera and the popular pantomimes and fairy tale operas of Germany. Significantly, though, he also detects resonances with English theatrical past, noting that Holst's work "takes the form of a parody on opera something like that in the *Beggar's Opera*." After showing a number of similarities between Holst's parodies and those of German composers such as Lortzing and Cornelius, Einstein tries to identify the English character of Holst's work:

I think the individual, personal, and indeed the 'English' character in this music is to be found in the cheerful, healthy, transparent, and vitally rhythmic qualities it possesses. It could not be melodically or harmonically 'stronger,' for it could not then develop those qualities. In the dances I find reminiscences of the old 'Masques' of the seventeenth-century; also an original English element in the many ballad-like passages.<sup>33</sup>

Most critics, though, dedicated themselves to discovering the hidden allegorical meaning they felt sure Holst intended. The nature of the story made it easy to invest with extra-musical meaning, as Edwin Evans pointed out in an analysis of the work:

The story might in fact be made to mean anything. A German *Privatdozent* would discover in it sixteen allegories, all different, and many mutually exclusive, and preface his exegesis with an elaborate and learnedly documented essay on the

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<sup>33</sup> Alfred Einstein, "Holst's 'The Perfect Fool': Some Thoughts of a German Musician," *Monthly Musical Record*, 2 July (1923): 198-9.

parallel between *der reine Thor* and the Muscovite innocent. But why should it mean anything? Why should it not be simply a ‘tale my Mother taught me?’ In a purely musical fantasy meanings are more often disturbing than helpful. Too often have we had a musical equivalent of literature. Let this be for once a literary equivalent of music. It is a blend of pure fantasy and high comedy, neither elements of which demands an esoteric meaning, or even a precise definition.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout this debate, Holst remained adamant that he only meant to write a light comedic work, and that this preface to the score was all the interpretation he would offer:

The characters of this opera (excepting the Troubadour and Traveller, whose origins are obvious) belong to no particular country or period. No special scenery is required as far as possible everything is left to the skill and taste of the producer. The well mentioned on p. 31 need not be visible. The author asks that the spirit of high comedy shall be maintained throughout. The work was originally intended to be performed without an overture, but should one be required, the author suggests his *Fugal Overture*, op.40, no.1.<sup>35</sup>

The reviewer of *The Times* captured the reaction of most reviewers: “One asks at the end: ‘What does it mean?’ or ‘Does he mean any of it?’ But it will be better to describe.”<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the most enthusiastically positive reviewer, Herbert Antcliffe, identified a hidden meaning in the work:

*The Perfect Fool* is the finest piece of real musical humor that has appeared for a long time. Its plot is almost negligible, though up to a certain point it is translatable as an allegory of the present condition of the theatre— of drama, music drama, opera, and the films. Technically the work is a mixture of *opera comique* and *opera bouffe*; dramatically it is a hotchpot of original melodies and skits upon Wagner (but not *Parsifal*), Verdi, and their successors.... As a whole the work will probably form the subject of much discussion, but almost certainly it will be an attraction to crowds to whom discussion is less than nothing.<sup>37</sup>

W. J. Turner, who tended to dislike Holst’s music, was withering in his criticism, although he suggests an intriguing allegory:

The Princess may represent the public, the Fool my represent the Cinema, which is dumb and blind and perhaps utterly silly, but which has won the applause of the

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<sup>34</sup> Edwin Evans, “The Perfect Fool,” *Musical Times* 64, June (1923): 390.

<sup>35</sup> Gustav Holst and Vally Lasker, *The Perfect Fool: Opera in One Act, Op.39* (London: Novello, 1923), i.

<sup>36</sup> Anon., “The Perfect Fool,” 12.

<sup>37</sup> Herbert Antcliffe, “The Perfect Fool,” *Musical News and Herald* 65, 19 May (1923): 494.

masses as Drama and Opera (Italian or Wagnerian) have not done. But, on the other hand, it is not by its pure folly that the Cinema has become popular, but merely by its comparative cheapness, so if that is the point of the satire or allegory it is a blunt one. In a note the author asks “that the spirit of high comedy shall be maintained throughout.” It is as if an author were to request the actors in a dull play to preserve its humor. It is impossible to maintain a spirit of high comedy, and I can find none in *The Perfect Fool*. Musically, Mr. Holst’s work is a pastiche. The opening Ballet is lively, but reminiscent of Saint-Saens in its commonplace Oriental colouring. The burlesques of Wagner are dull.<sup>38</sup>

Whether they liked or disliked the work, critics saw in it the potential for allegorical meaning. The most enduring interpretation of Holst’s opera came from Donald Francis Tovey, who wrote: “It is permissible to wonder if, consciously or psychoanalytically, the title-*role* originally symbolized the British Public, impossible to awaken, but possessed of a charm which impels the Spirit of Opera (the Princess) to woo it in vain.”<sup>39</sup>

Such frenzy to find allegorical meaning by critics highlights British insecurities about the indigenous tradition of grand opera. Many commentators and members of the music intelligentsia yearned to right the remaining perceived deficiency in British music,<sup>40</sup> the lack of national opera. They hoped, perhaps, for a great work to open the 1923 British National Opera Company season of opera at Covent Garden, which also included operas by British composers Ethel Smyth, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and

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<sup>38</sup> W. J. Turner, “*The Perfect Fool*,” *The New Statesman* 21, 19 May (1923).

<sup>39</sup> Tovey, “The Perfect Fool,” 284.

<sup>40</sup> In 1899 Holst’s teacher, Stanford, started a drive for a national opera that he would continue for the rest of his life. See Frederick and Percy Buck Bridge, Frederic Cowen, Ben Davies, Edward German, Alexander Mackenzie, Frederick Niecks, Walter Parratt, Hubert Parry, Landon Ronald, Charles Stanford, A. Visetti, Frederick Whelen, “Opera in London: A New Scheme,” *The Times*, 9 October 1912; Charles Villiers Stanford, “A National Opera,” *The Times*, 11 March 1899; Charles Villiers Stanford, “National Opera,” *The Times*, 28 December 1903. The British operas in the 1923 BNOC season at Covent Garden, which *The Perfect Fool* opened, rekindled the debate. See Hubert J. Foss et al., “Opera as It Is— and May Be,” *Music & Letters* 4, no. 1, 1923/01 (1923); Alfred Kalisch, “The British National Opera,” *The Sackbut* 3, no. 1, 1922; Maisie Radford, “A Comparative Study of Indigenous Forms of Opera,” *Music & Letters* 7, no. 2, 1926/04 (1926); Robert Radford, “The Future of Opera in England,” *Opera* 1, no. 1, January (1923); William Saunders, “National Opera, Comparatively Considered,” *The Musical Quarterly* 13, no. 1, 1927/01 (1927); Adolf Weissmann, “English and German Musical Life Compared,” *The Musical Times* 65, no. 972, 1924/02/01 (1924). For a polemical view of the problems of national opera, dating from the 1900s see Cecil Forsyth, *Music and Nationalism: A Study of English Opera* (London: Macmillan, 1911).

Rutland Boughton, signaling the beginnings of a British operatic tradition to compete with that of Germany, Italy, and France.<sup>41</sup> When met with Holst's light and farcical opera, they immediately turned to allegory as a way to invest the work with worth and seriousness that would signal the arrival of British opera as an equal to its continental rivals. The implication is that British opera must have a central element of seriousness to compete with the other operatic traditions. If this were not the case, then British opera would have "arrived" with the successes of William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan in the 1880s. Arnold Bennett identified what could be called the critical consternation that *The Perfect Fool* was not more than it was. After taking the composer to task for writing his own libretto<sup>42</sup> and characterizing the story as a successful skit that failed when transferred to the proportions of grand opera,<sup>43</sup> he concluded his review with a backhanded compliment characteristic of British journalism even today:

The British National Opera Company did well to produce *The Perfect Fool*, and has thereby acquired merit. *The Perfect Fool* is incomparably the best modern British opera. So there you are, and you are requested to make what you can of the situation.<sup>44</sup>

If Imogen can be believed, her father found it humorous that people were working so hard to concoct different complex allegorical meanings for his opera. Imogen remembers him reading the reviews and commenting: "This is a holy scream!"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The British National Opera Company was extremely circumspect in the run up to the premiere, offering no previews and granting only limited interviews. Perhaps this was an attempt to build excitement for the premiere, but it undoubtedly contributed to the confusion about the work's meaning which ensued after the first performance.

<sup>42</sup> "Nobody, for instance, in the whole auditorium believed for a moment that the Wizard would really have been such an ass as to recount the powers of his potion to a talkative old woman, or, having done so, to leave the colossal beaker unguarded for about a quarter of an hour." Bennett, "Gustav Holst's *The Perfect Fool*," 59.

<sup>43</sup> This suggests he may have been commenting on the relationship between *English Opera as She is Wrote* and *The Perfect Fool* although there is no extant evidence that Bennett was aware of the former.

<sup>44</sup> Bennett, "Gustav Holst's *The Perfect Fool*," 60.

<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst*, 271.

The idea of a light farce was much in keeping with the spirit of post-war Europe, but was unsuited for Covent Garden. As many historians have observed, the years following the end of the war saw a general attempt to escape from wartime horrors and losses. If we take Holst at his word, that the work is meant only to entertain, then it joins such works as Ernest Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* and Maurice Ravel's *L'efant et les sortilèges* that sought an escape from seriousness and tragedy.<sup>46</sup> Holst and his Morley students had much enjoyment and success with *English Opera as She is Wrote* and it is not inconceivable that Holst thought he could recapture its spirit at Covent Garden, creating a refuge from postwar reality just as *English Opera as She is Wrote* was a refuge from the misery of the First World War.<sup>47</sup>

The horrors of war nevertheless creep into the story. After the singing contest, there is a section of melodrama where the Shepherd describes a utopian countryside of contentment and peace destroyed when the Wizard's fire demons sweep over the land creating panic and death. The music commences sounding like what has been referred to as the "pastoral" English sound, the same aural cue Holst used in *Sāvitrī* to illustrate the peace and contentment of the souls whom she has comforted (see chapter 6). As the Shepherd describes the oncoming fire demons, the music is overcome with the terrifying fire music from the opening ballet expertly evoking destruction, menace, and death. This episode, is fleeting, but deadly serious, and strongly contrasts the lightness of the rest of

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<sup>46</sup> There are particularly strong general similarities between *The Perfect Fool* and *L'efant et les sortilèges*. Both have fantastic settings, and both blend elements of high and low art. See Roger Nichols, *The Harlequin Years: Music in Paris 1917-1929* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 91-5.

<sup>47</sup> This may literally be the case. There is an apocryphal story told by Imogen that *Opera as She is Wrote* was originally rehearsed in the North Lambeth tube station, which was being used as a bomb shelter during the war. See Holst, *A Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music*, 237.



the work. Though it was never commented on, it is easy to see this section as an evocation of the Great War, which still haunted Europe.

Perhaps the real problem of *The Perfect Fool* was the location and circumstances of its premiere at Covent Garden. Today, Covent Garden is one of the foremost opera houses in the world, but in the 1920s, the opera house was rented out to different syndicates who would sponsor seasons of opera, some featuring foreign opera companies, and catering to the distinctly international tastes of the small group of serious, wealthy opera lovers in London. There was not enough demand, though, for this sort of entertainment every night of the year, and so Covent Garden saw the performance of more “popular” genres. Up until the 1880s, Covent Garden was host to annual pantomimes, and in the same year as the premiere of *The Perfect Fool*, it opened its doors to audiences of variety theatre with *You’d be Surprised!* an American ragtime show featuring the famous variety performer George Robey.<sup>48</sup> The similarities between this show and *The Perfect Fool* did not go unnoticed by press who covered both opera and popular theatre:

*The Perfect Fool* is an operatic revue and, as such, more likely to damage the traditions of Covent Garden than was ever “You’d be Surprised!” It tilts at the very forms and conventions followed in the other works now being performed by the British National Opera Company, so that regular visitors are expected to praise operas one night and pooh-pooh them the next.<sup>49</sup>

This perceptive reviewer hit upon the subversive nature of Holst’s opera, which is quite separate from the question of allegorical meaning. Perhaps the elements of successful “low” indigenous theatre found in *The Perfect Fool* mustered in a parody of high art, would have appealed to variety or pantomime audiences, but it was presented to

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<sup>48</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *Popular Music of the Twenties* (Newton Abbot: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976), 31.

<sup>49</sup> Anon., “Holst Hits Out,” *Sunday Portrait*, 27 May (1923).

an opera audience. The reasoning by which Holst's opera was chosen to open the 1923 season of the British National Opera Company has been lost to history. Only fragments of the Company's archives remain, and there no correspondence surviving between Holst and its leaders. In returning to a project that was perhaps born of the failure of his own fascination with foreign opera (Richard Wagner in *Sita*), and infusing it with his knowledge and practical experience of the indigenous traditions of English opera and theatre he created an idiosyncratic hybrid. The irony is that Holst did write an original British opera, based upon centuries of theatrical tradition, only those traditions were outside what was accepted by those in search of British opera on par with continental models, and ill-suited to the conservative opera audiences of Covent Garden.

In this consideration of popular elements that influenced *The Perfect Fool*, it is important not to forget its ultimate inspiration, the works of Richard Wagner. *The Perfect Fool* was Holst's last comment on his relationship with Wagner. Here the master whom Holst once revered is parodied in both libretto and music, poking fun at not only Wagner, but also, perhaps, Holst's own obsession with Wagner's music. One does not sense, though, any vindictiveness in Holst towards Wagner. A story from Imogen suggests that though the active role of Wagner's influence had passed; Holst carried a lifelong appreciation for the composer, she writes:

Soon after the first performance of *The Perfect Fool* at Covent Garden in 1923 I happened to listen to a broadcast of the *Siegfried Idyll*.... I was thrilled by the sound.... My father came into the room just after the last bars of the *Siegfried Idyll* were over. I said: 'But it's *beautiful!*' 'Of course it is,' he replied. This was more puzzling than ever, because I was too young and too inexperienced to have learnt that a genuine appreciation can survive long after an all-absorbing passion has become a thing of the past.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered*, 135.

In writing a convincing parody of Wagner Holst demonstrated he could move un-self-consciously between that style and his own, and was sure enough of the difference between the two. He was not even in the country for the premiere of *The Perfect Fool*,<sup>51</sup> and had already turned his mind to new questions of beauty and universality that had been inspired by his experiences in the First World War. Having completed his most idiosyncratic contribution to Western opera, he left the critics to scratch their heads, and, characteristically, turned to other interests.

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<sup>51</sup> At the time of the opera's premiere, Holst was in Ann Arbor, MI to conduct his own works at the yearly May Festival. He did not see the opera on stage until his return. This disinterest in the premiere may seem odd, but, hopefully, as previous chapters have helped to show, it was probably another indication of Holst's disregard for public opinion.

## Chapter VIII

### Conclusion

This study has re-examined the period of Holst's life from the turn of the twentieth-century to the First World War, reevaluating our understanding of Holst and his compositional development from two separate perspectives: Imperialism and Wagnerian culture. From the very outset, it has been stressed that a study of this sort is an interpretation of the available facts in the context of the larger British culture of the period. It may well be that with new evidence the conclusions drawn in this study would need to be revised or even abandoned. If we had, for example, more direct evidence of Holst's view of the British empire, the arguments made for *King Estmere* and *Beni Mora* could be inverted. They could both be shown to be subversive critiques, proximate to Shostakovich in his relationship with Stalin, of British Imperial policy and culture. The chance of additional biographical information arising is slim, so interpretations of Holst rooted in context provide the most promising avenue to fresh insight in future studies of his biography and his music.

In connection with Holst's life, this study has presented arguments that the writings of Imogen Holst, and those which followed unquestioningly in her stead, are prone to obscure, mischaracterize, or ignore elements of his life, masking uncomfortable questions with entertaining anecdotes, or patronizing judgments. As is shown in chapters one through three, there are large bodies of evidence, both documentary and

circumstantial, that Holst was exposed to, espoused, and probably believed in Imperialist doctrines of British superiority and the inferiority of colonized peoples. This revision to our understanding of Holst does no more than place him amongst the majority of everyday Britons of the time. It does, though, shed new light on pieces that depict the East, or use Eastern sources.<sup>1</sup> The consideration of Holst's pieces which portray the clash of East and West, as well as the Imperial elements of his childhood home, substantially bolsters our understanding of the influence of the East and Imperialism in his music, highlighting an important divide between the treatment of the historical and the modern East in Holst's music. His Imperial views and the music that reflects them also establish him as sustaining the Imperial culture of Great Britain. Perhaps Imogen, who traveled to India to study its indigenous music later in her life, would have been embarrassed to write that her father had Imperial notions about the modern East, or more likely, with her large store of personal knowledge and her training as a composer, she did not even think of addressing her father's music from the perspective of culture, as the notions surrounding the study of Imperialism today are relatively new, constructed by a generation of scholars who lived mostly in a post-colonial age.

The other important topic that this study addresses is Holst's relationship with Wagner, a topic that Imogen treated with withering criticism and not a little contempt. Her characterization must also be seen in the context of her background as a twentieth-century composer living in a time of reaction against late romantic idioms, where Wagner could well have been seen as an impediment to compositional independence rather than

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<sup>1</sup> As was mentioned earlier, the Imperial aspect of Holst's appropriation of Eastern sources has already been addressed by Nalini Gwynne, showing how Holst's Sanskrit works were themselves part of the larger Imperial project, and that as well as using texts, Holst may have also been appropriating techniques and elements of Indian classical music, creating a complex dialogue of cultures between East and West. Gwynne, "India in the English Musical Imagination: 1880-1940".

an asset. But as argued in chapters four through six, Holst's contact with Wagner's music led to a slow and steady progression to compositional individuality. The early acts of *Sita* reveal an understanding of Wagnerian techniques, while in the last act Holst makes his first tentative steps towards individuality without foregoing the Wagnerian framework. The role that socialism plays in the work suggests the affirmation of socialist beliefs, which may also have colored his understanding of Wagner. His next opera, *Sāvītri*, demonstrates the influence of Wagner further individualized, as Holst's confidence in his own compositional voice increases through the reflection of deeply held beliefs about the supremacy of love. *The Perfect Fool*, a postscript to the influence of Wagner on Holst (though conceived around the same time as the other two operas), demonstrates him functioning as a fully autonomous artist, crafting a work that is highly individual in form and content. At its heart is a parody of Wagner, which by its lightness and lack of ill will demonstrates that Holst could look back at his years of Wagner emulation not as a hindrance, but rather as an asset.

Although Imperialism and Wagner are largely separate in this study, they do overlap. The music of *King Estmere* is competent, though in many ways unremarkable compared to the other works in this study, but its thematic organization and chromatic language place it in the period of Wagnerian emulation. Because it was written later, *Beni Mora*, composed between the failure of *Sita* and the composition of *Sāvītri*, displays many of the elements of mature Holst which were employed in the third act of *Sita* and in *Sāvītri*, especially the use of rhythmic ostinato, orchestral coloration, and the emphasis on thematic material rather than established classical forms as an overriding organizational

principle. From the perspective of compositional development, these pieces represent a single line, in spite of the perspective from which they have been viewed in this study.

There is every reason to believe that Holst saw a difference between works like *Sita* and *Sāvitrī*, which seem to espouse serious philosophic ideas, and *King Estmere* and *Beni Mora* that he called “light music.” (This distinction does not nullify the Imperial implication of these pieces which, to repeat, may have been so ingrained as not to be a conscious element of his thinking, as the portrayal of Western superiority is still present and is meant in no way as jest). *The Perfect Fool* is especially fascinating in light of this division as the reception and understanding of the piece is tied up with whether Holst was being serious.

In Holst’s compositional output after the First World War, both Imperialism and Wagner are absent as tangible influences on his music. The two operas that he wrote after 1924, *At The Boar’s Head* (1924) and *The Wandering Scholar* (1934), are both one-act comedies that show no overt Wagnerian influence. Similarly, after the war, Eastern topics, which had so fascinated Holst in the aughts and teens, are noticeably absent from his compositions. This further illustrates Holst’s ever developing compositional style, which displayed increased textural austerity and harmonic idiosyncrasy as he contemplated the nature of beauty and permanence in such works as the *First Choral Symphony* (1923-4), *Egdon Heath* (1928), and the *Choral Fantasia* (1930). This aesthetic shift away from pre-war influences and topics may be the result of Holst’s activities with the YMCA during the war, especially his visit to Athens where he marveled at the beauty

of the ruined Parthenon, an event he returns to in post-war lectures as he discusses the nature of beauty.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, the interpretation of Holst presented here demonstrates that his music was more reflective of British culture than had previously been realized. Although Imogen is often the target of criticism, she deserves credit for her untiring advocacy on behalf of her father, but her style and perspective are dated, and her writings obscure important questions about Holst's life and music that she thought insignificant or embarrassing. The future of Holst studies, I believe, lies in evaluating Holst in light of culture, and as our understanding of him grows with this pursuit, so too, I am confident, will grow his stature as one of the most important composers of the early twentieth-century.

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<sup>2</sup> Holst, *Gustav Holst; a Biography*, 200-204.



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