



GUSTAV HOLST - THE PLANETS AND BEYOND

ROGER ASKEW

The Arts Society Fylde
Lowther Pavilion Theatre
2 October 2024 at 2.00pm

Just at the moment, there is a lot of Holst around - which is hardly surprising as we are this year marking 150 years since the birth of this most well-known of composers. *The Planets* is one of the most popular and most recorded works in English music. Yet, apart from the tunes for the hymn *I Vow to Thee, My Country* and the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*, most of Holst's other music is neglected - which today's lecturer, Roger Askew, feels is unjust.

Born in Cheltenham to a markedly musical family, Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was in fact an unconventional man. He was a vegetarian and spent most of his working life as Director of Music in a girls' school, but he embraced Hindu philosophy and taught himself Sanskrit. He believed that music should be available for everyone and was appointed conductor of a socialist choir and Director of Music in Morley College, an institution set up for the educational benefit of working men and women. He championed the amateur musician and famously said, "If something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly". In fact he was a talented conductor and produced performances of real quality.

After the success of *The Planets*, first performed in 1918, he never wrote a similar orchestral work. He was also working at a time when musicians were beginning to wake up to the huge wealth of English folk music and many of his compositions are imbued with that folk-song quality which gives them great charm. On his first visit to The Arts Society Fylde, Roger Askew will examine Holst's life, the background to *The Planets* and will explore many of his other works, including his 'Oriental' suite *Beni Mora* (which was inspired by hearing a flute-player in Algiers), his choral masterpiece *The Hymn of Jesus* and the settings of the *Rig Veda*, some of the most important Hindu texts for which he provided his own translations. Gustav Holst was a true original, not fully understood in his own time. We can look forward to a lecture accompanied by many musical example - and should perhaps prepare for some surprises!

ROGER ASKEW

Roger was a chorister at Wells Cathedral School and a choral scholar at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he graduated with an honours degree in English. He combined a teaching career with professional singing in London, and after obtaining a further degree in Music became Director of Music at Daniel Stewart's and Melville College in Edinburgh. After retiring in 2003 he returned to the south of England. He is President Emeritus of The Stoke Poges Society.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

BBC Radio 3, Holst - Composer of the Week, presented by Donald Macleod, September 2024 (BBC Sounds)

Gustav Holst: A Biography, Imogen Holst, Faber and Faber, 2011

Image: Gustav Holst, Herbert Lambert, c.1921, National Portrait Gallery, London, by permission