

# INTRODUCTION

by Imogen Holst (1979)

## 1 'SEVEN PIECES FOR LARGE ORCHESTRA'

The facsimile in this volume represents the autograph and partly autograph full score of the seven movements of *The Planets* at the time of the first private performance in September 1918. Holst's original title of the work, which can be seen in the unaltered heading on his manuscript title page, was 'Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra'. By the time of the first (incomplete) public performance in February 1919 he had called it *The Planets*, with the subtitle 'Suite for Large Orchestra'.

This was the largest orchestra Holst had yet written for: quadruple woodwind, including the seldom-heard bass flute and bass oboe; a full brass section with six horns and two tubas; a percussion department needing five players in addition to the two timpanists; and two harps, organ and strings. Such a big orchestra was rare in English music at that time.

The work was the largest suite he had yet written. Owing to its length, concert promoters in the 1920s sometimes referred to it as a 'Symphonic Suite'. His earlier suites for full orchestra had been what he himself described as 'light music'; they included the discarded 'Phantastes' of 1911 and *Beni Mora* Opus 29 No. 1, an 'Oriental Suite' of 1909–10.

## 2 INFLUENCES OF ORIENTAL MUSIC AND OF NEW EUROPEAN MUSIC

*Beni Mora* was written as the result of a month's holiday Holst had spent in Algeria in April 1908. This was his first chance of hearing eastern music, and he came back to England with several oriental tunes scribbled in a sketch book and with vivid impressions of the unfamiliar sounds he had been listening to: piercing wind instruments; repeated fragments of dances played in procession for hour after hour; and intricate time patterns tapped out in a flurry of swift fingers on a drum. Years later, a hint of these flexibly interwoven rhythms was to find its way into the music of *Mercury*.

He was also influenced by some of the music that was being written in Europe in the early years of the century. During a brief visit to Berlin in 1903 he heard Strauss's *Feuersnot*, which he found 'unoriginal as opera'. In 1908 his friend Vaughan Williams told him all about the lessons he had been having in Paris from Ravel, whose motto was 'complexe mais pas compliqué'. A few years later Holst went to hear Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Petrouchka* at the London seasons of Diaghilev's 'Ballets Russes'. He was at the second English performance of Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* in 1914; his copy of the work was still in his music room at the time of his death. This was the only Schoenberg score that he possessed.

## 3 HOLST'S INTEREST IN ASTROLOGY

It was in the spring of 1913 while he was having a much needed holiday in Spain as the guest of Balfour Gardiner that Holst met Clifford Bax and learnt something about astrology. Soon afterwards, he wrote to a friend saying: 'I only study things that suggest music to me. Recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me, and I have been studying astrology fairly closely.' One of the books he read was Alan Leo's 'What is a horoscope?', published in London in 1913. From this textbook for beginners he learnt that Mars was 'headstrong, forceful and assertive'; Venus was 'of an even disposition', with a 'love of all beautiful things'; Mercury, the 'winged messenger of the gods', was 'quick in thought' and 'ingenious'; Jupiter was 'buoyant and hopeful'; Saturn was 'patient' and 'enduring'; Uranus was 'eccentric, abrupt' and 'unexpected'; and Neptune was 'subtle' and 'mysterious'.

The titles Holst gave to his 'Seven Pieces' briefly described each planet's character that had suggested music to him: the Bringer of War, the Bringer of Peace, the Winged Messenger, the Bringer of Jollity, the Bringer of Old Age, the Magician, and the Mystic. He never wrote any programme notes for the work. In a letter he wrote in 1918 to his friend Adrian Boult he said: 'There is nothing in any of the planets (*my planets I mean*) that can be expressed in words.'

## 4 THE YEARS WHEN THE MOVEMENTS WERE WRITTEN

He wrote *Mars*, *Venus* and *Jupiter* in 1914; *Saturn*, *Uranus* and *Neptune* in 1915, and *Mercury* in 1916. We know this from his own 'List of Compositions', which he wrote in a small notebook with a page for every year from 1895 to 1933. (The notebook is now in the British Library, Add.MS 57863.) The 'List' does not mention actual dates, and many people have thought he must have written *Mars* as a result of the outbreak of the 1914–18 war. He contradicted this in a lecture he gave in the 1920s, saying that the whole of *Mars* was fixed in his mind before August, and that in the second half of 1914 he was thinking about *Venus*, the Bringer of Peace.

Holst had applied for war-work, but had been rejected owing to the neuritis he suffered from in his right arm. Throughout the years when he was working on *The Planets* he continued to earn his living as a teacher, with classes in orchestral playing, choral singing, harmony and composition at St Paul's Girls' School, Wycombe Abbey School, James Allen's Girls' School and Morley College. The only time for composing was at weekends and during the month of August. He worked at bits of



MS PAGE NUMBER	AUTOGRAPH	NON-AUTOGRAPH
26	bar 158 (from fourth beat) through to bar 161: timp 2. Bars 160 through to 163: timp 1	instr names and words ND. The remainder mostly ND with some VL
27	bar 164: repeat sign for timp 1. Bar 166: fourth beat accents. Minim equals minim above str	the remainder probably all ND
28	bar 171: accents and hairpins. Bar 172: crotchet equals crotchet probably GH	instr names ND. Words ND except in bar 173 where <i>simile</i> to vlms is VL. The remainder probably all ND (see Introduction page 10)
29	nothing	everything ND
30	bar 185: bsn and d.bsn (but not the <i>ffff</i> )	the remainder ND

### Venus

page numbers (MS) 2–7 are GH; the remainder unidentified  
rehearsal figures I and II are GH; the remainder possibly JMJ

1	everything	nothing
2	nearly all	bar 15: cel's rests probably VL or ND
3	nearly all	bar 29: b.cl's rests probably VL or ND
4	nearly all	bar 49: vln 2's rests probably VL or ND
5	nearly all	bar 58: fl's rests VL. Bars 68 through to first quaver of 72: vln 2, vla and vlc VL
6	everything	nothing
7	nearly all	bar 92: ww's rests VL or ND
8	nearly all	instr names, clefs and key sigs ND. Bar 99: vlc's rests VL or ND
9	bars 108 through to 115: everything except fl, vla's <i>Morendo</i> , repeat signs for bsn and clef for hp. Bar 116: d.bsn, vlms 1 and 2, and vla	the remainder VL. The blue pencil scribble like a large 's' in bar 116 is unidentified
10	bar 119: 'Db' to hp 1. Bar 122: 'Gb' to hps 1 and 2	the remainder VL
11	bars 124 through to 126: pedal changes to hps 1 and 2. Bar 128: triplet signs and rests to hn, also probably all hairpins	the remainder VL
12	bar 129: hn, and probably all hairpins. Bar 133: <i>pp</i>	the remainder VL. In bar 130 glock's pencil deletion is unidentified
13	bar 134: vln 2's tie. Bar 135: hp 2. Bars 136 and 137: hairpins. Bars 137 and 138: '8' and wavy line to vln 2's lower stave	the remainder VL
14	bars 139 through to 141: '8' and wavy line to vln 2's lower stave. Bar 141: hairpins	the remainder VL

### Mercury

page numbers (MS) 2, 20, 21, 23, 24, and 27–30 are GH; the remainder unidentified  
rehearsal figures I to VIII are GH; the remainder unidentified

1	nearly all. The pencil <i>p</i> to db is probably GH, added when his arm was bad, or when standing up at a rehearsal	instr names, originally GH, have been rewritten on patch by IH. (See Introduction, section 5 page 10.) Bar 8: vla's rests probably ND
2	everything	nothing
3	everything except braces to fl, cel, hp and str	braces to fl, cel, hp and str ND
4	nearly all, including key sigs	instr names, braces and clefs ND
5	everything except braces	braces ND
6	nearly all	instr names braces and clefs ND
7	everything except braces	braces ND
8	nearly all	instr names, braces and clefs ND, except clef for perc which is GH
9	everything except braces	braces ND
10	nearly all	instr names, braces and clefs ND, except clef for perc which is GH
11	everything except braces	braces ND
12	nearly all	instr names, braces and clefs ND
13	everything except braces	braces ND
14	nearly all	instr names, braces and clefs ND, except bsn's tenor clef which is GH
15	everything except braces	braces ND
16	nearly all	instr names, braces and clefs ND, except hp 1's treble clef which is GH
17	nearly all, including the first four instr names, first three braces and first six clefs	instr names from b.ob down to perc ND; instr names on patch for cel and hp IH; braces to bsn and hn ND; braces on patch to cel, hp and str probably IH; the remaining clefs ND
18	nearly all	instr names ND; braces ND, except for ob and cl which may be GH; clefs ND
19	everything except braces	braces ND
20	nearly all, including key sigs and clefs to str	instr names, braces and remaining clefs ND
21	everything except braces. (For the reason for his signature at the foot of the page, see Introduction, section 8, page 11)	braces ND
22	nearly all, including key sigs	instr names, braces and clefs ND
23	everything except braces	braces ND
24	everything	nothing
25	everything except braces	braces ND
26	nearly all	instr names, braces and clefs ND
27	everything except braces	braces ND
28	nearly all, including 'One solo violin', where he originally had a figure I; the alteration has interfered with his normal handwriting of 'O' and 'v'	instr names, braces and clefs ND