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CHAN 2026

*an introduction to* **Gustav Holst**





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I sincerely hope this CD marks the start of your own lifelong passion for classical music.

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Classic FM presenter



## Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

	<b>The Planets, Op. 32*</b>	<b>52:28</b>
	Suite for large orchestra	
1	1 Mars. The Bringer of War	7:25
2	2 Venus. The Bringer of Peace	9:02
3	3 Mercury. The Winged Messenger	4:12
4	4 Jupiter. The Bringer of Jollity	7:30
5	5 Saturn. The Bringer of Old Age	10:03
6	6 Uranus. The Magician	6:04
7	7 Neptune. The Mystic	8:09
	women's voices of SNO Chorus	
	<b>Brook Green Suite†</b>	<b>7:21</b>
	for stings	
8	I Prelude. Allegretto	1:57
9	II Air. Andante – Poco animato	2:34
10	III Dance. Allegro	2:48



	St Paul's Suite, Op. 29 No. 2 <sup>†</sup>	13:01
	for strings	
11	I Jig, Vivace	3:12
12	II Ostinato, Presto	1:59
13	III Intermezzo, Andante con moto – Vivace – Tempo I	4:17
14	IV Finale (The Dargason), Allegro	3:32
	<b>Total time 72:50</b>	

Scottish National Orchestra\*  
 Edwin Paling leader  
 City of London Sinfonia<sup>†</sup>  
 Sir Alexander Gibson\*  
 Richard Hickox<sup>†</sup>

Although of Baltic extraction – his great-grandfather had served at the Imperial Russian court and had come to England from the Latvian port of Riga early in the nineteenth century – Gustav Holst was born in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire into a musical family. He was as infused with the spirit of the West Country as were those other architects of the new English music: Parry, Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells. Yet, as it had been beneficial for British musicians in the nineteenth century to espouse all things German, Holst was born 'von Holst' and was known as such for more than two thirds of his life (in letters Vaughan Williams called him 'Dear V'). He only changed his name because of wartime anti-German sentiment – in June 1915 he was even harrassed by the police on account of his presumed German nationality.

Holst's name has long been linked with that of Vaughan Williams; he and Holst were friends, each the other's critical sounding board. Their careers ran in parallel, both were pupils of Stanford, both later taught at the Royal College of Music, both were immensely influential in their day. (Yet there the similarity ended, for Vaughan Williams was financially independent whereas Holst had to earn his living.) The first musical allegiances of Holst were to Grieg and to Wagner, and while Stanford may have approved of the former he was not always so enthusiastic about the latter. Holst himself recoiled from the limitations of his prentice works, putting them away and inventing the now celebrated phrase 'early horrors' to describe them. Times change, and now that Holst's mature music is known and this early music has been performed, we have discovered that much of it is surprisingly worthwhile, if atypical of the mature composer.

From the beginning Holst had a brilliant command of the orchestra. Coming from a comparatively poor family background, he had to make his own way and, at first, this meant playing the trombone (in the Scottish Orchestra and the orchestra of the Carl



Rosa Opera and, in summer seasons, with popular bands) – a sure way of gaining a practical understanding of the orchestra from the inside. He had to live, though, and once he had been appointed music master at the then new St Paul's Girls School in Hammersmith, in 1905, most of his life was spent teaching. He was only able to support himself as a composer in the last years of his life and remained at St Paul's almost until his death.

With his early commitment to the socialism of William Morris and his interest in adult education and working men's music making, it was always likely that Holst would take a special interest in folksong, and thus it proved. When Vaughan Williams took down his first folksong in December 1903 it was Holst who was particularly interested in making arrangements for the concert hall; though he never collected folksongs himself, within a year or two he was producing his own folksong rhapsodies, and gradually achieved a distinctive personal style.

By the time he was forty Holst had still experienced only very few performances of his own music. Had it not been for the exposure of three works which his friend Balfour Gardiner promoted in 1912 and 1913 in the course of his series of concerts of new British music, Holst would have doubted he would ever achieve success as a composer – as Arnold Bax remarked, Balfour 'saved Holst from neglect and a weighty sense of personal failure'. Gardiner programmed the first hearings of the suite *Beni Mora*, of the revised version of Holst's twenty-minute scena *The Mystic Trumpeter*, setting Walt Whitman's 'From Noon to Starry Night' for soprano and orchestra, and of *The Cloud Messenger*, a forty-minute choral setting of the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa. So when Holst set out to write what became *The Planets* he was a seasoned composer, but not a popular one. With little wider following, he was working in a private world and with no enforced deadlines or promise of performance; Holst was writing for himself.

### *the planets*

Between 1908 and the outbreak of the First World War, orchestral music in England changed. As the new music by Debussy and Ravel was first heard in London (*La Mer*, 1908; *Nocturnes*, 1909; and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1909; and Ravel's *Ma Mère l'oye*, 1912) and as Diaghilev arrived with his Ballets russes, adding Stravinsky (*The Firebird*, 1912; *Petrushka*, 1913 and *Le Sacre du printemps*, 1913), and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1914), composers' orchestral palettes were vividly expanded and the grip of Teutonic musical apparatus dealt a significant blow. These influences are internalised by Holst in *The Planets*, composed between 1914 and 1916.

*The Planets*, and his next extended work, *The Hymn of Jesus*, would bring Holst celebrity in the early 1920s. However, his new music continued to puzzle audiences. The main works were *The Perfect Fool*, an opera mocking romantic opera, his Choral Symphony, for which even his friend Vaughan Williams could only manage 'cold admiration', the wonderful half-lit tone poem *Egdon Heath*, then thought austere, and a range of spare but vital later works, including *Hammersmith* for military band, the short opera *The Wandering Scholar*, the *Lyric Movement* for viola and orchestra, and the Scherzo that is all he left of a promised orchestral symphony.

Holst was dead at fifty-nine, at the very peak of his powers, but most of his music was destined to be forgotten for decades. It was *The Planets* which kept his name alive, becoming one of the most popular British works in the orchestral repertoire and being heard throughout the world.

Holst was not the least significant composer to have had his horizons immeasurably expanded by the discoveries of the new music before the First World War. Yet where did *The Planets* come from? The manuscript is headed simply 'Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra'. Apart from the works of Debussy, Ravel and



Stravinsky already referred to, the most notable London orchestral premiere before August 1914 was of the Five Orchestral Pieces of Schoenberg, first performed on 3 September 1912 conducted by Sir Henry Wood, and repeated in January 1914 under the baton of Schoenberg himself. Several recent commentators have suggested that Holst's starting point may well have been the example of Schoenberg's revolutionary score. Whether Holst attended the first performance is not known, but a note in his appointments book suggests that he was certainly at the second. Lowinger Maddison, director of the Holst Birthplace Museum, has pointed out that a miniature score of Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces was one of Holst's most valued possessions, which he kept near him when composing. That Holst referred to it is confirmed by his annotations and ticks by certain orchestral effects, and in 'Venus' there appears a celesta phrase similar to one in Schoenberg's score.

Holst gestated *The Planets* for two or three years, but it is interesting to note that with the exception of 'Mercury', which was written last, he wrote the movements in the sequence in which we now know them. (Before the First World War, the planet Pluto had yet to be discovered.) However, Holst does not present the inner planets in planetary order, which is, of course: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars. By working first inward and then out from Mars we arrive at Holst's sequence which, taking into account the characters of the planets, now resembles a 'seven ages of man' sequence, from youth to age. *The Planets* was actually composed over a period of nearly two years. Holst said it grew in his mind slowly,

like a baby in a woman's womb... during those two years it seemed of itself more and more definitely to be taking form.

First, in 1914, came the insistent rhythmic tread of 'Mars'. But it was far from being a response to the outbreak of war, for Holst had completed his sketch by July, before war had been declared. Later,

during the first autumn of the War, came 'Venus' ('The Bringer of Peace') and then 'Jupiter' ('The Bringer of Jollity').

This was one of those large projects (like writing a big book) that stay with the writer over a long span of time. The summer and autumn of 1915 saw Holst complete 'Uranus' and 'Neptune', while 'Mercury' was not done until early in 1916. We should also remember that Holst worked very slowly and, because of the neuritis in his right arm, was helped by a varied team of devoted amanuenses, mainly his former students from St Paul's School. Thus the manuscript is in a variety of hands which his daughter Imogen, in the published facsimile, was largely able to identify.

Holst's orchestra in *The Planets* is very large, reflecting the examples he had heard in the works of Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel and Schoenberg. Particularly worth listening out for are the bass (or alto) flute and the bass oboe, the latter an instrument also heard in colourful scores of this vintage by Delius and Bax.

In September 1918 Holst, now with the YMCA, was posted – in army uniform – to Salonica, and before he left London his friend Balfour Gardiner made him a present of a private performance of *The Planets*, hiring Queen's Hall and the New Queen's Hall Orchestra. An army of students from St Paul's helped prepare the orchestral parts, and Holst asked the then unknown young conductor Adrian Boult to conduct. Subsequently, the first couple of public performances were of selections from the suite before Albert Coates gave the first complete performance in November 1920. Later Holst recorded the work twice, in 1923 and in 1926.

*The Planets* and his choral work *The Hymn of Jesus* made Holst famous in the years immediately after the war, though he did not relish the experience. He now entered on the short-lived phase of his mature composition and briefly seemed to anticipate the coming vogue for neoclassicism, finding himself in accord with the times though through independent exploration.



### *the planets and astrology*

The first evidence we have of Holst's interest in astrology comes in the memoirs of Clifford Bax, *Inland Far*, published in 1925, in which he describes a holiday taken by himself with his brother Arnold, Balfour Gardiner and Gustav Holst in March 1913. Clifford wrote:

Holst informed me that he had just become interested in astrology, and on such a congenial topic I discoursed at length. A frown puckered Gardiner's brow. We could almost hear him muttering, 'Really, really!' And there is no doubt our conversation grieved him.

In a later book Clifford remembered it differently, saying that it was he who had introduced Holst to astrology, adding:

having used up the inspiration which he derived from astrology, he almost entirely lost interest in the subject.

Balfour Gardiner's reaction is of interest when one realises that the astrological background to the music was not followed up by any commentator at the time. In fact, it may well be that too close an interest in any detailed astrological significance of the work would have prejudiced the success of the music, astrology being generally viewed as suspect.

In her introduction to the facsimile edition of the manuscript of *The Planets*, Holst's daughter Imogen noted that one of the books her father had read was Alan Leo's *What is a Horoscope?*, published in London in 1913. In fact, Alan Leo was the author of a string of popular books and pamphlets promoting astrology in the years before and during the First World War. Holst's copy had the subtitle 'and how to cast it', and Holst was a lifelong practitioner, though only casting the horoscopes of friends. It was Leo who alerted Holst to the character of the planets, giving each planet a thumbnail description such as 'Mars the Warlord' and 'Saturn the Reaper'. Holst took his title of 'The Mystic' for 'Neptune' from Leo's description.

'Mars. The Bringer of War', with its insistent 5/4 rhythm and winding horn motion, is notable for the way its climaxes are built over wide spans, and for the power of those climaxes when they are reached. Leo characterised people born under the influence of Mars as 'headstrong, forceful and assertive'. We may well believe that Holst at times found them too forceful.

'Venus. The Bringer of Peace' establishes a contrast by dropping the brass and percussion and creating a mood of limpid calm, in the outer sections anticipating the infinities of 'Neptune'. Venus signalled someone of 'an even disposition' and a lover of 'all beautiful things', though Holst may not have been altogether successful in suggesting the warmth of the 'affectional and emotional side' of those born under its influence.

'Mercury. The Winged Messenger' is the scherzo following the slow movement, though doubtless Holst did not intend there to be any remnants of German symphonism in his scheme. Again the weight of the massed sound of 'Mars' is eschewed, the flickering contrasts between woodwind and muted strings creating a remarkably fleet-footed mood. Here Holst certainly succeeds in establishing the quickness of thought that Mercury gives those under its influence, as well as the 'adaptability' and 'fertility of resource' identified by Leo.

'Jupiter. The Bringer of Jollity' is notable for its good tunes and fulsome orchestration. We are certainly back to earth, celebrating the 'abundance of life and vitality' with music that is 'buoyant and hopeful'. Nobility and generosity are characteristics of those born under this planetary sign, though at the arrival of the familiar tune, later given the words 'I Vow to Thee, My Country', Holst would doubtless have observed that the nobility could be overdone, as he demonstrated in his own recordings of the music.

'Saturn. The Bringer of Old Age' is remarkable for its inexorable tread (note the bass flute at several points). We have a presage



of the infinite. Imogen Holst highlighted the 'patient' and 'enduring' characteristics identified by Leo, though elsewhere the latter noted that 'those born under its influence will be more plodding and persevering than brilliant and active'. The music recasts Holst's 'Dirge and Hymeneal', written immediately before 'Saturn' and setting words by Thomas Lovell Beddoes:

Woe, woe, this is death's hour  
Of spring; behold his flower,  
Fair babe of life to whom  
Death and the dreamy tomb  
Was nothing yesterday, and now is all.

Holst goes well beyond his astrological starting point in underlining the transience of life, although surely at the end, in 'Neptune', he relents and offers the consolation of eternity to which 'Saturn' has led, though not before the fireworks of 'Uranus'.

'Uranus. The Magician': the influence of Uranus gives 'eccentric, abrupt' and 'unexpected' traits. By choosing the subtitle 'The Magician' Holst was doubtless referring to the more occult strands that might colour those under its influence. Malcolm MacDonald has pointed out that the arresting four-note figure is in fact a musical motif derived from Holst's name: GuStAv H (G, E flat, A, B). Is Holst himself the Magician? This might be interestingly explored in the light of Michael Short's observation that this motif is also reminiscent of the appearance of Pan in Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*.

'Neptune. The Mystic' is the only title that Holst borrowed from Alan Leo's book, in which the sign is characterised as 'subtle' and 'mysterious'. The planet Neptune at the far edges of the solar system looks out to interstellar space, as man faces the evermore, 'to infinity', as Imogen Holst remarked. This study in *pianissimo* textures closes with the slowly fading vocalising of an out-of-sight female choir. Holst asks for the singers to be placed in an adjoining room, the door to be slowly and silently closed at the end.

### brook green suite

The title of the miniature *Brook Green Suite* for strings refers to the district of Hammersmith in London where St Paul's Girls School is located. The work was written in 1933 for the school's junior orchestra, and was first given at the school in March 1934. A fourth movement, 'Gavotte', was rejected after the first performance. In the 'Dance' Holst uses a tune which he had heard played by a piper when watching marionettes at Taormina, Sicily in 1929.

### st paul's suite

Holst was first appointed as Director of Music to St Paul's Girls School in 1905, when the school was only two years old. By the time (1912–13) he came to write the four-movement *St Paul's Suite* for the school's string orchestra he had already written his two suites for military band (1909 and 1911), and the second in particular – founded on English traditional tunes – informs the style of the school suite, in fact providing the fantasia on 'The Dargason' for the last movement. He wrote the suite as an expression of gratitude to the school which had built a soundproof studio for him (in which it was composed).

The vivacious opening 'Jig', alternating 6/8 and 9/8, sets the mood. In the gossamer *Presto* second movement, 'Ostinato', the strings are muted, and the flowing quaver ostinato and pizzicato bass (pizzicato is much used to make the piece easily played by the less advanced students) project the solo violin's fast waltz theme. In the third movement, 'Intermezzo' ('Dance' in the manuscript), more pizzicato strings underpin a wistful violin solo whose slightly oriental inflection is reminiscent of Holst's suite *Beni Mora*, and indeed the tune derives from notes taken down in Algeria in 1908. The *Vivace* rhythmic dancing of the middle section reappeared later in the ballet music of Holst's comic opera *The Perfect Fool*.



The 'Finale' was arranged from the Second Suite for military band, slightly extended, and presents the folk dance tune 'The Dargason' in 6/8 against which, after some variations, Holst counterpoints 'Greensleeves' in 3/4. He plays this trick in many compositions and it works particularly well here.

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Telephone: + 44 (0)1206 225 200 Fax: + 44 (0)1206 225 201

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## Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

The early twentieth-century British composer Gustav Holst was deeply influenced by England's countryside and folksong, and adopted a consciously nationalist style in his music. 'The Planets' is full of high-voltage writing, showing an acute feeling for atmosphere and instrumental colour. Scored for a very large orchestra, it is joyful, magnetic and powerful and a brilliant introduction to the composer's music.

1 - 7	The Planets, Op. 32	52:28
8 - 10	Brook Green Suite	7:21
11 - 14	St Paul's Suite, Op. 29 No. 2	13:01

Total time 72:50

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