

# SINGING IN THE SUNLIGHT

*A Study in Selected Early Works*  
by *Gustav Holst*

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## ABSTRACT

The English composer Gustav Holst (1874-1934) is famous for a few works that have attained a place among classical favourites; most notably, his suite *The Planets* (completed in 1917) is a staple of orchestral repertoire. Holst is also known for his interest in the culture of India, and for taking part in establishing English national music in the first decades of the 20th century.

Generally speaking, Holst's earliest works, from the first decade of the 20th century, have received little attention, being regarded solely as preliminary studies for the works of his later, "mature" period. Apart from the fact that Holst generally evaded larger formats in the years of his supposed "maturity" (*The Planets* is one of a handful exceptions), he went through such a number of stylistic changes that it is questionable if the notion of an homogeneous mature style is really a viable concept in Holst's case. From that perspective, it is more rewarding to study the works of 1900-14 in their own right.

In the dissertation, it is argued that Holst's early works (and, by implication, his "mature" works as well) are best understood within the cultural context in which they appeared. Three themes are singled out as being especially interesting with regard to the establishment of an English musical identity: First, nationalism and the relation to foreign cultures; both those within the borders of Europe and others, more remote; second, the relation between the advances of science and consequent challenges to traditional religion; and finally, changes in perception of art during the years around the turn of the century. A general historic and cultural background is provided for these themes. Special attention is also paid to the concept of the "English Musical Renaissance" – the attempts to establish English art music rivalling that of the Continent – which constitutes an immediate and necessary context for the works of Holst.

In the following chapters, several individual works are explored; more context, especially problems related to genre, being combined with the themes outlined above in each case. The works range from the opera *Savitri*, which is fairly well established as a 20th-century "classic", to the orchestral Suite in F, *Phantastes*, withdrawn by the composer after the first performance.