

# GUSTAV HOLST

## *Master of Magical Music & Song*

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*BY JOHN GRAHAM*

“The Heavenly Spheres make music for us,  
The Holy Twelve dance with us,  
All things join in the dance!  
Ye who dance not, know not what we are knowing.”

-- *Gustav Holst, in a letter to Clifford Bax.*



**Gustav Holst**

Who can forget the first time they heard Holst’s stunning suite of music, The Planets?\* Whether it was as a child or adult, it is difficult to forget the immediate reaction to hearing the music, particularly the gargantuan “Mars.” Love it or hate it, it is magical, powerful and evocative music.

The energy of “Mars, the Bringer of War,” is represented by a frenetic and unremitting march in 5/4 time. The orchestration of the piece is stuffed full of brass instruments giving the music incredible raw force and sense of movement. Kettle drums boom as they are beaten with the hard-ended sticks. The strings are furiously struck with the wood of the bows, producing a harsh and almost sabre-rattling sound. The music grows in size, energy and volume until it reaches almost ear-drum rupturing level before coming to a powerful conclusion. I still get a real buzz of energy from listening to the piece after many years. What a contrast to the gentle “Venus, the Bringer of Peace” that follows “Mars” in the suite.

Many Hermetic magicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have integrated key sections of The Planets into their meditations and rituals to great effect. In terms of the Ogdoadic system, the music is particularly suited for meditation and inclusion in a number of the planetary workings of Planetary Magic and much First and Second Hall work. However, Holst has much more to offer those looking to add additional colour to their magical practice.

Where did this man find the inspiration for his music? Where did he come from and what were his interests and philosophy?

I first became more interested in the spiritual side of Gustav Holst’s work when my own job took me to the West Country of England and the spa town of Cheltenham. Unexpectedly, here was Holst’s birthplace. I was intrigued to find out a little more about this enigmatic man whose music I had grown up to.

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\* An excellent recording of this is available on Naxos 8.550193

His birthplace of Cheltenham is a small and strange English town with a number of esoteric characters linked to it over the past 120 years, including Florence Farr (Golden Dawn / Theosophy Society), WG Gray (Society of the Inner Light / Sangreal Foundation), Murray Hope (The Atlanteans et al), Jaz Coleman (occult philosopher, musician and Composer in Residence for the European Union), not to mention the esoteric publishers Helios Books (Gareth Knight). The town is also a stone's throw from the powerful and ancient Rollright Stones, an abundance of old Knight's Templar sites as well as Dr John Dee's Upton-upon-Severn.



**Neptune Fountain - Cheltenham Promenade**

Holst's birthplace is also blessed by being situated at the foot of the Cotswold scarp, underneath the gentle "Seven Springs," source of the great river Thames, (known by the Roman's as "The Isis"). At the heart of the town rests a truly magnificent water feature of Neptune riding his sea-horses up out of the waves. It seems apt that the magic of The Planets suite should be born from the cradle of this exceptional spa town.

Holst was born in 1874 and spent his early life growing up in Cheltenham. An oversensitive and unhappy child, he was plagued by eyesight problems, asthma and neuritis in his hands. As a child he detested practicing the violin, but relished the piano.

As he grew older, Holst failed his initial attempts to gain scholarships to the Royal College of Music and various other colleges in London. Undeterred, he gained his first professional engagement as an organist in 1893. Within a short space of time he also became organist and choirmaster of another local choral society in the heart of the Cotswolds. These experiences helped him to develop a solid comprehension of the workings of a choir. Choral music and the choral tradition in England would remain vitally important throughout the rest of his life.

In the autumn of 1895 Gustav met English composer musician and choral expert Ralph Vaughan Williams for the first time. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship with a person who would do much to preserve the ancient folk songs and customs of England. It was also the beginning of their habit of playing compositions to each other and sharing ideas while still working on their scores. Sometimes they would walk along Chiswick Mall or the Thames with other college friends while discussing the poetry of Walt Whitman or the works of William Morris and Edward Carpenter.\* During this time Holst was also introduced to George Bernard Shaw, brief member of the Golden Dawn.

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\* Edward Carpenter's work is of interest to the Ogdoadic practitioner. Key works include "Towards Democracy," (excerpts reprinted in The Magical Philosophy: Book 1, also made available on the House of Thoth website at [www.houseofthoth.net/publications](http://www.houseofthoth.net/publications)), "Pagan and Christian Creeds," and "The Healing of Nations and the Hidden Sources of Their Strife."

In 1899 Holst developed a voracious appetite for Sanskrit, Eastern Mysticism and, in particular, the principles of Hinduism. Of specific interest to him was the Rig Veda and the Baghavat Gita. The limited translations available at the time seemed lacking in substance, so he joined the School of Oriental Languages at the London Institute to learn the language and make his own poetic translations.

While there is no evidence to confirm that he was a formal member of the Theosophical Society, Holst was a certainly a close friend of people who were. It is evident from his body of work that he shared the same views. Notably, his stepmother had also been a member of the Society and regularly talked to him about its philosophy in his formative years. In London, Holst became friends with GRS Mead, Theosophist and translator of many important hermetic works including, Pistis Sophia, and Corpus Hermeticum. It is thought that Mead introduced him at this time to the well-known astrologer Alan Leo, who was also a Sanskrit scholar and a fellow member, along with Holst, of the Royal Asiatic Society. Mead and Leo became close friends.



**Clifford Bax**

Holst also became good friends with Clifford Bax, an “ardent Theosophist,” playwright, poet, novelist and critic who also shared a keen interest in astrology. Bax moved in circles that frequented him with W B Yeats, Crowley, Austin Osman Spare, Florence Farr, John Symonds and “Dame” Frieda Harris, the artist who gave life to Crowley’s magnificent tarot the Book of Thoth. As Holst’s astrological expertise grew he became renowned for regularly casting horoscopes for his friends and their families. From his interests and friendships at this time sprang the creativity that would become The Planets. Many other musical works would also be sparked into creation from his friendships and spiritual

interests. One of the least well-known but perhaps most interesting works is his “Hymn of Jesus,”\* a profound Gnostic exploration of time and space. It is well worth further exploration.

One of the core elements of Ogdoadic daily practice is the Solar Adorations. At least two key versions have been practiced by the Tradition. One previously used was Egyptian-based; the other one is based on a poetic rendering of one of the great Vedic Hymns, Usha (translated as “The Dawn”). This is where practitioners of the Art Magic may be particularly interested in Holst’s work. Holst made the following interpretation of Usha, which is beautifully poetic. I suspect many Ogdoadic practitioners will both recognise and appreciate it:

### **Usha (Dawn)**

Behold the Dawn, the fairest of all visions,  
Day's glory now appears.  
Arise! For the night hath fled!  
Arise and greet the Dawn.  
Welcome her! Unveiled she now appeareth,  
All things greet her radiant smile.

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\* According to GRS Mead the ‘Hymn to Jesus’ describes a ritual of initiation involving a Master and his students, who form a circle enclosing a would-be initiate in a question-and-answer dialogue.

Borne by wingèd horse and car  
She steals across the sky.  
Child of heav'n arrayed in shining garments,  
Blushing maiden draw thou near:  
Sovran lady of earth and sky,  
We hail thee as our queen.  
Heav'n's breath awakeneth creation,  
The sky is all aflame,  
Th'eastern Portals open wide.  
The Sun draws nigh.  
Greeting thee, the holy fire ascendeth,  
Greeting thee, our hymns arise,  
Greeting thee, the Sun appeareth,  
Greeting thee, thy worshippers  
Bow down and bless and adore.

This is a highly devotional interpretation of the Usha. There are a number of beautifully sung recordings of this and other Vedic Hymns attentively put to music by Holst. Perhaps Vac (Speech) is one other inspirational interpretation worth quoting. There are shades of Neith, Sophia, Leukothea and the Magna Mater in this piece:

### **Vac (Speech)**

I, the queen of all,  
First of those that mankind worship,  
Worthy of all praise,  
I proclaim aloud my wisdom.  
Hearken unto me,  
My word is true:  
Unto God and Man  
I bring blessing,  
Pouring forth my wealth,  
Making wise the man I cherish.  
Through me each one lives,  
Each one breathes and sees and hearkens.  
All unite in me,  
I alone sustain creation,  
Compassing the earth  
I reach t'ward heav'n.  
In the water's depth  
I have my dwelling,  
On the summit of the universe  
I bring forth the Father.  
Beyond the earth and sky  
I reign in my mystic grandeur.

An article that identifies more detail of the influence of the Theosophy Society and related thought on the development of the Aurum Solis is well overdue.

I hope you've enjoyed this brief introduction to the music and magic of Gustav Holst. If you're interested in further explorations of Holst and related matters, I would strongly recommend the following sources:

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