



Holst Birthplace Museum Newsletter



Chairman's Note

By the time you receive this Newsletter, the Museum face lift will be under way, funded in part by a £5,000 Community Pride grant. We may be shrouded in scaffolding, firstly at the rear of the building, where some essential remedial and cosmetic work will be done, followed by a complete re-decoration of the front elevation. The Museum will remain open throughout the 3-4 week operation, and, once the work is finished, should present a sparkling edifice to greet summer visitors.

I am sorry to report that two of our volunteers who have each made a significant contribution to the success of the museum have decided to retire. In their place, we welcome Lesley Ford, John Drywood and Suk-a Snapes to add their skills to the reservoir of talent the volunteers provide.

Visitor numbers are understandably down on last year (remember the bitter cold and snow of February!) but it has been most encouraging to have a 'Full House' for the Museum events and exhibition talks to date. As you will see from the article on p3, we are continuing to run a full events programme, including a Music Sale as part of the Heritage Open Days in September - so please start collecting sale items now.

Marjorie Imlah

Holst at the Proms...

Devotees of the Proms will no doubt already have got hold of their programme for the 2009 season of concerts, and perhaps already made their choices for advance booking. They will have discovered that Holst will be suitably remembered and celebrated along with Elgar and Delius in a "1934 weekend" on 25th and 26th July. I would recommend the reading of a chapter in the programme by Stephen Johnson entitled *1934: England at the Crossroads*. The article highlights the pivotal significance of this year in the history of British Music, which was not only to see the deaths of Elgar, Holst and Delius, but also the births of Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies. The latter composers initially dismissed the work of their English forebears as 'dancing on the village green', but would later acknowledge the valuable influence of works by Holst and Vaughan Williams on their creative development.

Stephen Johnson describes Holst's *Planets*, to be performed on July 25th, as 'one of the most

original, imaginative and technically brilliant things in the British orchestral repertoire.' On July 26th Holst's *First Choral Symphony*, inspired by the poems of John Keats, will be performed for the first time at the Proms.

Liz Auster

...and at Thaxted

This year's Thaxted Festival includes two concerts in which the music of Holst figures: on Sunday 28th June at 7.30, when the English Sinfonia perform the Double Concerto (soloists: Janice Graham and Sarah Ewins); and Friday 3rd July at 8 pm, when Pascal & Ami Rogé play the piano duet version of *The Planets* made by Nora Day and Vally Lasker, in the edition prepared for re-publication by Fiona and John York.

Alan Gibbs

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Holst as Conductor

A brief but fascinating insight into Holst's conducting style is to be found in a book, "Sixteen Symphonies", written by Bernard Shore and published in 1950. Shore was a viola player who, despite terrible injuries to his fingers in the First World War, was a member of leading British orchestras, playing in some first or early performances of Holst's works. Holst, he writes, never forgot his trombone-playing days and saw himself as a member of the orchestral community. He was thus popular amongst the players. His manner was evidently informal. "Before a rehearsal he would be seen climbing about the platform, discussing details with various players, gossiping with old friends and cultivating new ones – and leaving a trail of overturned stands as he short-sightedly made his way back to the rostrum." Shore concedes that he was never "a virtuoso" conductor (a verdict confirmed from other sources), but suggests that his "cool head and unshakeable sense of rhythm" were of the greatest importance in interpreting his own works. "Such a master of effect was he in his writing that there was no need for him as a conductor to direct how to play this or that – it was all in the score."

In his later years Holst became more exacting, but never seems to have been overtly critical. If a passage displeased him, he "would look rather pained but went on quietly rehearsing until all fitted and the passage was safe." On the other hand he seems always to have been ready to interrupt a rehearsal to give praise when this was due. "I say, Mr Hall, that was first class! I knew you could do it when I scored that bit, but I never thought it would come off like that! Sounds grand!" One wonders how he could have known that it was "Mr Hall" who was so deserving, for (according to Shore) he was so excessively short-sighted that "he could not distinguish the players, but pointed his stick roughly in the direction of one or another." No doubt there were times when Holst found it tactful as a conductor to appear even more short-sighted than he really was.

"Sixteen Symphonies" is in the Museum Library, and, despite a somewhat ponderous style (the author refers to Holst's "impecuniosity"), is well worth reading.

Christopher Fletcher

The Planets remixed at Balcarras School

Mars re-imagined on the electric guitar, accompanied by trumpet fanfare and a heavy dose of drums; discordant vocals and a screech of violin; Uranus as a cacophony of samba beats - these are just some of the sounds being explored by a group of musicians at Balcarras School in Charlton Kings, Cheltenham for their project *Holst: The Planets Remix*.

The project has been funded by the Young Roots stream, part of the Heritage Lottery Fund, which provides financial support for heritage organisations who want to work with young people.

The aim of *Holst: The Planets Remix* is for the young people to develop their own composition inspired by *The Planets* through a series of music workshops. The emphasis is upon experimentation, and for the young people to take the lead in shaping the project as a whole. The workshops began in March after two days of trips to the Holst Birthplace Museum, the Mechanical Music Museum in Northleach, the Handel Museum, London, and a backstage tour of the Royal Opera House. The trips provided focus and context for the project.

The Holst scholar and composer Raymond Head has been engaged to manage the workshops, along with a percussion specialist, a sitar player and a mandolin player.

The piece will be premiered at Balcarras School on Tuesday 19th May, and then in Imperial Gardens on Sunday 24th May (see opposite). There will also be a special performance at Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum on Thursday 16th July, as part of a *Festival of Celebration*, when our project will be showcased alongside other Gloucestershire Young Roots projects. A recording will also be available after the completion of the project.

Laura Kinnear

From Cradle to Grave

Significant items relating to the life (and death) of Gustav Holst will be on show at the Museum in the next exhibition, *Commemorating Holst: 75 years since the death of the composer, 23 May – 19 September*. The exhibition is to mark the 75th anniversary of Holst's death. The earliest known image of Gustav Holst, a baby carte-de-visite, will be on show alongside other important material, including reviews of his early performances in Cheltenham and various obituaries. The majority of the items are either rarely exhibited, or have never been on show before, and will be drawn from the archives at the Holst Birthplace Museum, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum and private lenders.

Holst in the Gardens

Join us on Sunday the 24th of May from 12.00 noon to about 3.30 pm in Imperial Gardens, when all are invited to celebrate the life of Gustav Holst on the 75th anniversary of his death (which falls on the following day). Adding lustre to the occasion is the fact that it has been a year since the magnificent statue of Holst was unveiled.

Many facets of Holst's character will be represented on the day including his music, his inspirational teaching and his interest in the philosophies of the east. Music, performed by the Cheltenham Bach Choir and the Cheltenham Silver Band, will include a new composition written by

the students of Balcarras School as part of the Young Roots Project, centred in the Museum (see opposite), and the fanfare written for the statue unveiling by Raymond Head. Members of Aquarius Severn will present a vivid re-creation of Holst's birth chart and will be on hand to explain it. There will be a marquee in case the weather is unkind, but we are planning a warm and welcoming day.

Entry is free (though donations would be appreciated) and everyone is welcome. Come and bring a picnic and friends and enjoy an exciting afternoon.

Events

Those who attended the concert in the Barn at Siddington last year will know what a magnificent venue it is. This year, we are delighted that Paul and Ana Gifford Nash have again invited us to their beautifully-restored cruciform barn. We are delighted to be able to offer a concert by *51 Strings*, provided by David Powell, sub-principal cellist with the CBSO, and Katherine Thomas, principal harpist with the Welsh National Opera. The concert will take place on Sunday, the 14th of June, beginning at 11.30 am and followed by lunch with wine. Tickets are £25 and are available from the Museum in person at 4 Clarence Road, Cheltenham GL52 2AY or by post (a stamped self-addressed envelope, please).

The AGM this year will be held on Monday the 22nd of June at 2.30 pm in the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum. Following the meeting, the well-known and well-loved founder of the Corelli Orchestra, Warwick Cole, will speak. There is no charge, and everyone is invited.

Other dates to note are: Thursday, the 13th of August at 7.00 in the Museum, when David Kaye will talk on Brass Bands; Saturday the 5th of September at 2.30 in St Andrew's Church for the Friends of the HBM AGM; and Saturday and Sunday the 12th and 13th of September for the Heritage Open Days and music sale at the Museum during the usual opening hours.

An Evening To Savour

An appreciative group of Museum supporters enjoyed a very special fund-raising evening on Saturday 7th March. By kind invitation of Nina, Princess Odescalchi, we were welcomed to her Pittville home with a glass of champagne and canapés. We next took our seats in the elegant period drawing room for the concert ("Strings Attached") which had been billed as music for guitar and harpsichord - but where was the harpsichord?

Noted classical guitarist Raymond Burley began with apologies from his keyboard colleague Gilbert Rowland, who was unable to appear after falling ill earlier that day; but he then introduced a fine replacement, Norwegian guitarist Arne Brattland, who had kindly agreed to step in at such short notice.

They comprise two-thirds of the Rodrigo Guitar Trio (on tour in North America this spring) and their experience and empathy in playing together

shone through a satisfyingly varied programme (from Scarlatti to contemporary Brazilian composer Gismonti), creating a range of moods and exploring the instrument's colours and technical possibilities. The intimacy of the setting added greatly to my enjoyment, with a chance to appreciate the role of eye contact and breathing in the players' delicate communication. A musical feast!

Finally, with mind and heart well nourished, we were treated to a splendid buffet supper, produced with customary flair by the Museum's talented "catering team" (who would have a wonderful future, should they ever think of turning professional!). With time to chat to old friends, and the opportunity to meet new ones, this evening was indeed a taste of so many of the good things in life. Thank you very much to everyone involved.

Angela Applegate

The Friends' Page

Friends' Music Day

Saturday March 21st offered a terrible choice for some. Should one stay at home to watch the last matches of the Six Nations rugby union series, or join in the Holst Friends' Music Day that offered an afternoon choral workshop under the guidance of conductor John Wright and an evening of music making in the manner that Holst would have encouraged? In reality it was not a contest. The lure of singing with John, of enjoying oneself and participating in a feast of evening music, was all irresistible. No-one was disappointed.

The evening offered a variety of music composed over at least a four century time span and performed by individuals and ensembles, including the music of Holst that began and finished the evening with a brief return in the middle.

At the piano Neil Williams, playing two of his own compositions, reminded us that music is not just about playing the works of others but that composition is alive and well. Melody flowed too from the delightful piano playing of John Wilson as he performed Mendelssohn and Grieg.

Helen Wright, accompanied by John Wright, sang songs by Quilter and Britten, the folksong arrangements of the latter echoing a similar interest in the genre by both Holst and his friend Vaughan Williams. Nicola Carvell also reminded us of Gustav Holst's earlier exploration of Hindu literature with the opening song of her sequence in which she was accompanied by Brian Carvell in just one his many roles of the evening.

It was a wind quintet that gave us the first Holst of the evening and later increased the urge to foot tap with some lively Ibert. A larger ensemble of eight string players led by Wendy Ritson performed the first movement of that remarkable octet of a youthful Mendelssohn. The largest ensemble of all was the thirty-two voices of the remarkably well balanced choir that had come together for the first time that very afternoon to attempt a mastery of five short British choral works of which four were unaccompanied. If complete mastery was a challenge that remained

for another day, there was little doubt about the resonance of the final rousing piece of the evening – Gustav Holst's *Turn back O Man*.

Despite such compelling advice we left looking forward to further celebrations of this nature but also realising that such events do not just happen. There is a lot of preparatory work and all of us who benefited are grateful to Sue Adlard for spearheading the arrangements for the workshop, and to Carol Sadie for organising the evening concert. We also thank all who worked behind the scenes, as well as those who provided more than enough to satisfy the healthy appetites engendered by music making and listening.

Graham Lockwood

Benefactors' Scheme

As announced in the February Newsletter, the Friends have launched a Benefactors' scheme. The initial response to the scheme has been very encouraging and we thank those who have taken this opportunity to contribute generously towards the running costs of the Museum.

The first event held exclusively for Benefactors took place on 3rd April when there was a champagne reception and a private viewing of the recent exhibition prior to its official opening.

If you are interested in becoming a Benefactor, full details are available from Sue Adlard, whose contact details are below.

Not a Friend yet?....

If you are not already a Friend please do consider joining. Not only would you have the satisfaction of giving financial and general support to the Museum but also would enjoy many other benefits, including free admission to the Museum, price reductions at Events run by both the Trust and the Friends, discounts at 3 local restaurants and 'two for one' admission rates at both the Elgar Birthplace and Handel House Museums.

Membership rates are:

Single £15, Joint £20, Family £25, Corporate £50, Single Benefactor £60, Joint Benefactors £100, Single Life £250, Joint Life £350.

For further details and application forms, contact the Membership Secretary, Sue Adlard
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