

Holst

English Musical Renaissance | Week 10



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- 1874: Born Cheltenham, of Latvian descent
 - 1893: Entered RCM: studied under Stanford
 - 1901: Developed interest in Sanskrit
 - 1905: Teacher: St Paul's Girls' School, London
 - 1907: Tutor at Morley College (until 1924) where Holst and his students gave first performance (since 17thc) of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*
 - 1932: Visiting lecturer in composition, Harvard
 - 1934: Died

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

2. Works and influences

Some key works

- 1900-6 *Sita* (opera)
1908 *Savitri* (opera)
1909 Suite No.1 in Eb for wind band
1910 *A Somerset Rhapsody*
Beni Mora
1908-11 Choral Hymns from the *Rig Veda*
1912-13 *St Paul's Suite*
1914-16 *The Planets*
1917 *The Hymn to Jesus*
1922 *The Perfect Fool* (opera)
1924 *At the Boar's Head*(opera)
1927 *Egdon Heath*
1930 *Hammersmith*

Influences

- Socialism
Folksong (later works)
Wagnerism (early career)
Theosophy/mysticism (throughout)
Orientalism, especially India (throughout)

3. *Beni Mora* (1910)

- Three movement work for orchestra, premiered in London 1912.
- Inspired by time Holst spent in Algeria (1908); he took the name from a book by Robert Hichens called *The Garden of Allah* (1904)
- Considered Holst's first mature orchestral work
- Displays key characteristics of Holst's mature style:
 - Imaginative/colourful orchestration.
 - Striking treatment of rhythm and meter.
 - Cyclical treatment of material/form.

4. Beni Mora

Three movement work comprising:

- First Dance
- Second Dance
- Finale: 'In the street of the Ouled Naïls'

Ouled Nail

A tribe living in the Algerian Ouled Nail Range. Women from the tribe could earn money dancing in the city of Biskra.



5. *Beni Mora*: Finale

Listening

- Opens with repeated chorale-like idea: stepwise melodic line: e- a/e-a# (upper viola line). Unstable effect. See bb. 1- 14
- Flute fragment ‘interrupts’ and develops into the main theme of the work, bb. 14-18.
- Listen to 12'05" [here](#). Note 4/4 and 12/8 time signatures.
- This ostinato theme continues (almost) throughout the movement, repeats 163 times.
- Other themes appear in different instruments beginning with a three-note idea on:
 - oboe (b.27) trumpet (b.33) piccolo (b.35)
 - This develops into a longer theme (b.42)
 - Followed by a soaring theme in Vln. I (b. 50)
- Listen again [here](#) - this time to 13' 22'

6. *Beni Mora* - Finale

Bar 71 (rehearsal figure '4') Listen [here](#) to 14' 37"

Shift from 12/8 over 4/4 to 9/8 over 3/4 with the ostinato now in the oboes.

This is taken up by horns, trumpets, Vln 2 and Vla (b. 99) then all strings and woodwind

Then, the Chorale idea breaks through **f** on brass (b.114) all other instruments have the ostinato. Listen [here](#).

Dynamic climax at b. 137 **fff** - note trajectory of dynamics *ppp* at the start to **fff**

Texture begins to reduce - note clarity of flute ostinato from b. 142, which eventually gives way to the timps at b. 177 Listen [here](#).

7. *Beni Mora*: reception

Vaughan Williams said:

‘If it had been played in Paris rather than London it would have given its composer a European reputation, and played in Italy would probably have caused a riot.’

Ralph Vaughan Williams, ‘Gustav Holst’, *Music & Letters*, October 1920,
pp. 305–317.

8. *The Planets* (1914-16)

Seven-movt work, first performed in 1919

Orchestral suite based on astrological studies a lifelong interest of Holst's. He wrote to a friend in 1913 saying:

'Recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me, and I have been studying astrology fairly closely'.

[From: Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst: a biography*, (London, 1969), p. 43]

Largest orchestra used by Holst in any of his works

Variety of form/idea

Stylistic features of *Beni Mora* taken further

- Precision of orchestration
- Freedom of form
- Use of ostinato to great effect
- Modernist aspects throughout.

9. The Planets: Mars, the bringer of war

First, listen [here](#) to 1'31"

- 5/4 rhythm with ostinato theme: a repeated pitch of G on strings *col legno*, harp and timpani
- Over this, a theme on lower woodwinds and horns, characterised by fifths and semitones: G-D-Db etc.
- The ostinato them continues before changing pitch at b. 40

Listen [here](#) to 3' 26".

- New theme is introduced at b. 45: chromatic parallel chords with ostinato disappearing by b. 57, (Fig. III).
- Momentum continues with on-beat 5/4 crochets from b. 66 (2'19") and militaristic figures in Tenor Tuba and Trumpets.
- At b. 96 (Fig. VI) the chromatic theme from b.45 returns in unison, along with a triplet figure from the ostinato theme on side drum. Listen [here](#).
- Momentum builds to a full return of the ostinato theme on all instruments at b. 110
- Militaristic sounding; modernist too in its sparseness and sonorities
- Written pre-war but resonated in war time

10. *The Planets*: Neptune, the mystic

Begin by listening [here](#) to 45'22"

Directionless/timelessness achieved through orchestration and harmony:

Orchestration: see score attached (p.1 of 'Neptune')

Bitonal effect through oscillating E minor and G# major triads

Continues with keys generally a third apart

Listen from [here](#) to the end

- Wordless female chorus placed off stage (see score). Fades away to the end of the piece.
- Effect? A mystical collapse of time and space.

11. Holst summary

- **Various influences and interests:**
 - India and the East
 - Mysticism/astrology
 - Folk song (later works)
- **Modernist musical language:**
 - Use of rhythmic and melodic ostinati
 - Free approach to form/harmony
 - Skilful orchestration/focus on sonority