

1-1-1984

Gustav Holst and George MacDonald

R. B. Shaberman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

Recommended Citation

Shaberman, R. B. (1984) "Gustav Holst and George MacDonald," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

Gustav Holst and George MacDonald

R. B. Shaberman

1984 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Gustav Holst—an appropriate occasion to record the influence of George MacDonald on one of our greatest composers.

Gustav Holst was born in Cheltenham in 1874. At the age of 23 he set to music a poem from Chapter 5 of *Phantastes*, calling it “Song to the Sleeping Lady.” Holst omitted the first 16 of the 48 lines, commencing his song with line 17, which runs, “Rest is now filled full of beauty.”

In 1911 he composed a suite for orchestra called “Phantastes.” It was performed on July 23 1912 at the Queen’s Hall, London, by the New Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer. However he withdrew it after this first (and only) performance.

The Suite is in four movements, each prefaced with a literary quotation. That of the first (Prelude) is from **[end of page 18]** *Phantastes*, and begins, “The whole garden was like a carnival . . .” The second movement (March) is prefaced with three lines from the well-known poem “Jabberwocky” by MacDonald’s friend Lewis Carroll. The other two movements are “Sleep” and “Dance.” In a letter to a friend Holst wrote that the music of this Suite was as much a part of him as his settings of the Vedic hymns, and likewise reflected his strong mystical inclinations. (Holst had taught himself Sanskrit.) The *Phantastes* Suite is important, for elements from it were later used in the “Jupiter” movement of “The Planets,” in the Dance of the Spirits of Water from “The Perfect Fool,” and in other works.

Earlier Holst had made sketches for the first scene of an opera entitled “The Magic Mirror,” based on the story of Cosmo in Chapter 13 of *Phantastes*. According to Imogen Holst, the libretto was probably by Fritz B Hart. There are several versions of the introduction and opening scene. A musical quotation dated September 25 1896 is given in the *Thematic Catalogue* p. 235 (see below). None of the above pieces by Holst have been published.

There are other MacDonald associations with Gustav Holst. After the MacDonald family left their house in Hammersmith (The Retreat), it was bought by William Morris. It became the headquarters of the Hammersmith Socialist Society, and Holst attended lectures given there by Morris, George

Bernard Shaw and others. (Holst set to music some poems by Morris.) These lectures were held in the long room in which the MacDonalds had presented their theatricals. In that same room Holst conducted the newly formed Hammersmith Socialist Choir, and dedicated his “Song to the Sleeping Lady” to one of the sopranos, Isobel Harrison. They married in 1901, and to their only child Imogen, who died on March 9 1984 aged 76. [19] We are indebted for these and other musical and biographical data concerning her illustrious father.

Sources (Dates are of first editions)

Gustav Holst by Imogen Holst. Oxford University Press, 1938.

A Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music by Imogen Holst. Faber Music, 1974.

Holst by Imogen Holst. Faber & Faber's 'Great Composers' Series, 1974.

Song to the Sleeping Lady

Rest is now filled full of beauty,
And can give thee up, I ween;
Come thou forth for other duty,
Motion pineth for her queen.

Or, if needing years to wake thee
From thy slumbrous solitudes,
Come, sleep-walking, and betake thee
To the friendly, sleeping woods.

Sweeter dreams are in the forest,
Round thee storms would never rave;
And when need of rest is sorest,
Glide thou then into thy cave.

Or, if still thou choosest rather
Marble, be its spell on me;
Let thy slumber round me gather,
Let another dream with thee! [20]

Or art thou Death, O woman? for since I
Have set me singing by thy side,
Life hath forsook the upper sky,

And all the outer world hath died.

Yea, I am dead; for thou hast drawn
My life all downward unto thee.
Dead moon of love! Let twilight dawn:
Awake! and let the darkness flee.

Cold lady of the lovely stone!
Awake! or I shall perish here;
And thou be never more alone.
My form and I for ages near.

But words are vain; reject them all—
They utter but a feeble part:
Hear thou the depths from which they call,
The voiceless longing of my heart. **[21]**