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The Planets by Gustav Holst (review)

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MUSIC REVIEWS

Edited by Matthew Ertz

RESURRECTING THE FACSIMILE TO HOLST'S *THE PLANETS*

Gustav Holst. *The Planets*, op. 32. Facsimile edition. Edited by Imogen Holst and Colin Matthews. London: Faber Music, 2023. [Foreword, p. [5]; Contents, p. [7]; Introduction, p. 9–14; Facsimile Score p. 15–230; Textual Collation, p. 231–49; Appendices, p. 250–72. Cloth. ISBN 978-0-571-54273-4. $215.]

Although Gustav Holst's significant output has been explored well enough that he is no longer generally regarded as a "one-hit wonder," his "Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra" (as he originally named *The Planets* on his title page) nonetheless looms large in his legacy. Certainly the work has received considerably more attention from recording companies, orchestra programming, and film than any of the rest of his compositions. Perhaps, then, its place is not disproportionate, even if it inevitably casts a giant shadow. Thankfully, the rest of his oeuvre is no longer in total eclipse.

In 1969, Faber Music initiated a collected edition of Holst's works. The plan was not to newly engrave the scores, but instead to reproduce the (partial) autograph manuscripts themselves. Produced under the editorship of Imogen Holst and Colin Matthews, *Gustav Holst—Collected Facsimile Edition* resulted in just four volumes: the chamber operas *Sāvitri* and *The Wandering Scholar* (pub. 1974, the fortieth anniversary of his death); several works for small orchestra (pub. 1977); *The Planets* (pub. 1979, and hereinafter referred to as the 1979 facsimile); and the Choral Symphony (pub. 1983). Thereupon the series foundered, as it seemed that Holst's day had not yet come. Fortunately, this short-lived edition is widely available in music libraries, though it is perhaps somewhat overlooked.

The volume reviewed here is essentially a second edition of the third volume of the old series. It should be stressed, however, that this is not merely a reprinting, but a genuine resurrection in a renewed form: the manuscript score is reproduced in new color scans rather than the old black-and-white images (and now includes the calligraphic title pages that were introduced in 1946 when Imogen Holst had each of the seven movements bound before donating them to the Bodleian Library as a set); the 1979 facsimile front matter and back matter is newly typeset but appears intact, with a few updates. Otherwise, only a brief foreword by Colin Matthews is added. In fact, the only significant respect in which the new edition is not an improvement on the last is that the dimensions are further reduced. Holst's manuscript is reported as being 420mm x 325mm; it is reproduced at 305mm x 234mm in the 1979 facsimile (disregarding the margins of the published volume); in 2023 it appears at 285mm x 222mm—only

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about two-thirds the size of the original. Granted, to reproduce the source at its full scale would have yielded an oversize volume, but perhaps this limited edition of five hundred copies might have warranted it.

The great value of any facsimile is to see the manner of the notation in the original source, and to be able to try to figure out why and how it got that way. With Holst this is particularly important: due to his neuritis, many of his "autograph" scores are in the hands of amanuenses. *The Planets* is no exception, being mainly notated by two of his associates at St. Paul's Girls School, Vally Lasker (1885–1978) and Nora Day (1891–1985), as well as by his former pupil Jane Joseph (1894–1929). Imogen Holst did valiant work in identifying the different hands throughout the score, contributing a section on "Details of the various handwritings" to the backmatter of the 1979 score, which is included here as well. The sheer scope of this information can be overwhelming, as even on a single page there may have been multiple hands involved in just notating the music of a single page, to say nothing of later clarifications and emendations. A hard-copy facsimile alone is not the best means of conveying this information: ideally it would be partnered with a digital facsimile that would enable the user to add and remove overlays indicating the activity of different copyists, making it easier to discern any patterns of who did what and why. Such a resource could also allow for high resolution magnification. The Bodleian has not made a scan available online; perhaps one day such a digital edition will come to be.

One reason that seeing the original notation is so important with Holst's works especially is that his copious abbreviations (in the interest of sparing himself painful labor) are routinely re-notated (i.e., spelled out in full) in published editions. These abbreviations range from *colla parte* and ditto signals (for whole bars reiterated again and again) to stems lacking noteheads (indicating a changing rhythmic profile for the same repeated sonority). Very often the copyists used the same laconic notations, and examining these in the facsimile intensifies one's awareness of the prevalence of ostinato and looping in the texture—something that is not as conspicuous on the page when the musical figures are written out in full. (Through the use of such abbreviations, it is no surprise the manuscript sometimes gets much more content on a page than the published score. This is especially true in "Neptune.")

Both the 1979 and 2023 facsimiles include as appendices two sample movements in another scoring. Appendix 1 is "Holst's arrangement of *Mars* for two pianos," and it is almost entirely in his own hand. Colin Matthews takes pains to emphasize that this is an arrangement of the orchestral original, rather than the other way around (p. 5). It might be more accurately described as a short score in the form of a two piano-version of orchestrally-conceived music: that is, the short score precedes the notation of the full score (rather than an *ex post facto* reduction of it), as it gives sketchy indications of the orchestration. A great many of these instructions have been struck-through in pencil, presumably after the assistant had used them to get the essentials of the work notated in the full score, with the rest of the (very many) details conveyed to her orally by the composer, sitting at her elbow. (Those instructions do not in any way seem to affect how one might perform this on the piano, and in any case they were deleted from the published two-piano version.) The Royal College of Music (RCM) holds the manuscript reproduced in Appendix 1, and has made it available on Archive.org, including two further

movements: https://archive.org/details/RCM-MS-4558-4559-4560/.

Appendix 2 gives "Holst's arrangement of *Neptune* for organ duet," also almost entirely in Holst's hand. In this instance there are no indications of the orchestral scoring, but "precise instructions for organ registration" (p. 265). Indeed, he goes beyond precision to thinking through how to make the registration changes happen—so that sometimes player 1 is given instructions about changing the pedal stops, even though that player never touches the pedals. This intriguing arrangement—the only movement of *The Planets* in this scoring—was never published, so it is particularly useful to have it here. (It is also held by the RCM, but has not yet been made available online.)

The editors refer several times to a vital source—Holst's own marked-up copy of the first (1921) edition—without ever giving any details of its whereabouts. On a hunch, given the Aldeburgh connections to both of the editors, I located it in the catalog of the Britten-Pears Archive, under shelfmark HOL/1/2/75/8/ (https://www.bpacatalogue.org/archive/HOL-1-2-75-8-1). Given its importance, I would have welcomed the addition of scans of a few salient pages included in the 2023 facsimile, especially as it does not seem to be otherwise available online.

Aside from its smaller physical dimensions, this new volume surpasses the 1979 facsimile in almost every respect. In one instance the new scans present more actual musical substance, as one paste-over that had previously deleted two bars of music has been removed since 1979 ("Jupiter," between bars 265 and 266). The color reproduction also reveals new details—particularly the use of red ink sometimes (but not always) for alternate-instrument cues to cover bass flute and bass oboe parts. One quibble: the new scans are generally fantastic, but on one page in my copy (p. 257) the resolution was surprisingly grainy and sub-standard; I could not detect whether this was an issue with the scan or with the printing—in any case, it only affected one portion of the page, and it did not seem to obscure any vital detail. And another issue: the running heads (or rather "feet," as they are at the bottom of the page) indicate the measures contained on the page. These are printed flush outside; in the 1979 facsimile these also listed the name of the movement, which in 2023 appears separated from the measured numbers, only on recto pages and flush inside—hardly visible when quickly paging through. Then again, the seven movements of *The Planets* are so distinct musically that the user hardly needs to be told which movement any given page is from. Perhaps little damage is done, but this small modification does not seem to be an improvement.

The price of the new volume is certainly reasonable. I advise any collegiate library that does not already own the 1979 facsimile to get this one: *The Planets* is just too significant in the twentieth-century orchestral repertory to let this opportunity pass by. But the question arises: for libraries already holding *Gustav Holst—Collected Facsimile Edition*, should this new publication be a high-priority for acquisition? Budgets are limited, and there is an ever-increasing scope to collect. For that question, each acquisition librarian will have to use their best judgement.

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