

SOMM
RECORDINGS



HOLST

The Perfect Fool Ballet Suite
Sāvitrī · The Planets

Choral Hymns (II) · from the Rig Veda
A Songs for Soprano & Violin
The Evening-Watch · Hammersmith

HOLST
150

GUSTAV HOLST 1874–1934

CD 1

Sāvītri H.96 Chamber opera in one act

Libretto: Gustav Holst, after the *Mahābhārata*

1	"Sāvītri! Sāvītri! I am Death" <i>Death · Sāvītri</i>	5:55
2	"Greeting to thee, my loving Sāvītri!" <i>Satyavān · Sāvītri</i>	0:18
3	"The forest is to me a mirror" <i>Sāvītri · Satyavān</i>	1:22
4	"Love to the lover" <i>Satyavān</i>	0:44
5	"Once I knew Maya" <i>Sāvītri · Satyavān</i>	1:22
6	"Sāvītri, Sāvītri! Mine arm is pow'rless" <i>Satyavān · Sāvītri</i>	0:35
7	"I am with thee; my arms are round thee" <i>Sāvītri</i>	2:19
8	"Sāvītri! – Ah! All fades!" <i>Death · Sāvītri</i>	0:55
9	"Welcome, Lord! Thou art called The Just One" <i>Sāvītri</i>	1:06
10	"Thine is the holiness" <i>Death</i>	1:31
11	"Then enter, Lord; dwell with me!" <i>Sāvītri · Death</i>	2:20
12	"Stay! Grant me this boon!" <i>Sāvītri · Death</i>	3:01
13	"Ah! Death, The Just One" <i>Sāvītri</i>	2:30
14	"Loneliness and pain are ended" <i>Sāvītri</i>	0:41
15	"Sāvītri! Is it thou?" <i>Satyavān · Sāvītri</i>	2:45
16	"Unto his kingdom death wendeth alone" <i>Death</i>	1:00
17	"I am with thee, my arms around thee" <i>Sāvītri</i>	1:26

Sāvītri: Arda Mandikian *soprano* · Satyavān: Peter Pears *tenor*

Death: Thomas Hemsley *baritone*

English Opera Group Chorus and Orchestra, Sir Charles Mackerras *conductor*

Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda (3rd Group) H.99 for female chorus and harp

Text: transl. Gustav Holst from the Sanskrit

18	I. Hymn to the Dawn	2:20
19	II. Hymn to the Waters	2:02
20	III. Hymn to Vena	4:43
21	IV. Hymn of the Travellers	2:35

Michael Jefferies *harp*

Purcell Singers, Imogen Holst *conductor*

4 Songs H.132 for soprano & violin

Texts: anonymous 15th century selected from Mary Segar's *A Medieval Anthology*

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 22 | I. Jesu Sweet, now will I sing | 2:48 |
| 23 | II. My soul has nought but fire and ice | 1:10 |
| 24 | III. I sing of a maiden that matchless is | 1:28 |
| 26 | IV. My Leman is so true | 2:32 |

Honor Sheppard *soprano* · Nona Liddell *violin*

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|----|--|------|
| 26 | The Evening-Watch H.159 for mixed chorus (SSAATTBB) | 4:46 |
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Text: Henry Vaughan (*Silex Scintillans*)

Pauline Stevens *mezzo-soprano solo* · Ian Partridge *tenor solo*
Purcell Singers, Imogen Holst *conductor*

- | | | |
|----|--|-------|
| 27 | Hammersmith H.178 Prelude & Scherzo for orchestra | 14:45 |
|----|--|-------|

BBC Symphony Orchestra, Norman Del Mar *conductor*

Total duration: **69:36**

CD 2

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | The Perfect Fool H.150 Ballet suite from the Opera | 10:30 |
|---|---|-------|

NBC Symphony Orchestra, Dr Malcolm Sargent *conductor*

The Planets H.125 Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|------|
| 2 | I. Mars, the Bringer of War | 6:54 |
| 3 | II. Venus, the Bringer of Peace | 8:27 |
| 4 | III. Mercury, the Winged Messenger | 3:28 |
| 5 | IV. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity | 7:32 |
| 6 | V. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age | 8:31 |
| 7 | VI. Uranus, the Magician | 5:53 |
| 8 | VII. Neptune, the Mystic | 7:30 |

Boston Symphony Orchestra & Women's Chorus
Arthur Fiedler *chorus master*
Sir Adrian Boult *conductor*

Total duration: **58:50**

Gustav Theodore von Holst was born in Cheltenham on 21 September 1874. His father, Adolph von Holst, was the organist and choirmaster of All Saints' Church in the town. Gustav (as he was always known) had a complex European heritage, with musicians in several generations of his family. His great-grandfather Matthias Holst, a German, had been a composer and harp teacher to the Tsar's court at St Petersburg, but the family had lived in England since 1802. A forebear had assumed the "von" prefix as a means of attracting superior pupils when teaching music; Gustav Holst dropped it in 1918, near the end of World War I, when working with the YMCA and troops in Salonika. His mother was English, the daughter of a solicitor from Cirencester.

Young Gustav went to Cheltenham Grammar School from 1886 to 1891 and learned the piano and the violin; the former was his favoured instrument. He started composing from around the time he went to the grammar school; among a range of health complaints was neuritis, which made playing the piano difficult. This disappointed his father, who thought he could make a career as a pianist, but he paid for Gustav to spend four months at Oxford after leaving school to study with G.F. Sims, the organist of Merton College. Despite breathing problems associated with asthma, he also became highly proficient on the trombone.

Money was tight and would remain so throughout Holst's life, which led to overwork and the need for occasional support from more affluent friends, notably Ralph Vaughan Williams. To earn a living Holst took an appointment, after his time with Sims, as organist and choirmaster at the Gloucestershire church of Wyck Rissington; his duties included conducting a choral society at Bourton-on-the-Water, which broadened his skills. He applied for a scholarship at the Royal College of Music but, despite having already composed an operetta, was unsuccessful. His father borrowed £100 to finance a year's studies, and Holst joined the college in May 1893. By cutting out luxuries (and indeed, meat: he became a vegetarian) and moonlighting as a trombonist, he made enough money to tide him over until, in 1895, the RCM awarded him a scholarship. He was taught the history of music by Hubert Parry and composition by Charles Villiers Stanford, who attempted to wean him off an early infatuation with Wagner.

No one influenced Holst's music more, however, than Vaughan Williams, whom he met at the RCM in 1895, and Holst had the same effect on his friend. Intellectually, he was also affected by the ideas of William Morris and became a socialist, though of a mild, and not what would come to be known as a Bolshevik, variety. He left the RCM in 1898 and began to compose assiduously and to seek to earn

money from performances of his works. To survive he played the trombone for a range of orchestras and ensembles and conducted various choirs. In one, the Hammersmith Socialist Choir, he discovered his future wife, Isobel Harrison: they were married in 1901.

Two years later, after his father's death, Holst decided to give up orchestral playing and focus on composition. To finance this he took three major teaching posts, between which he shared his time: from 1905 he taught at James Allen's Girls' School in Dulwich and at St Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith. He worked at the former until 1921 and at the latter until his death in 1934 (it became something of his spiritual home, and he wrote much of *The Planets* in his room there, and also *Hammersmith*). From 1907 until 1924 he taught at Morley College, an adult education centre in South London.

Although Holst was, with Vaughan Williams, a pioneer of a "national music" based on English folk song – something that became apparent in his *Somerset Rhapsody* of 1906–07 among other early works – he also had a fascination for Indian culture and set several Sanskrit texts to music in works such as his three-act opera *Sita* (written from 1899 to 1906), *Sāvitrī* (1909) and four sets of *Hymns from the Rig Veda*. His interest in the exotic went beyond the geographical east. With financial help from Vaughan Williams he went to Algeria in 1908 to try to improve both his mental and physical health – he suffered from depression – and the music he heard people making there inspired his radically innovative work *Beni Mora*.

The root of *The Planets*, his most renowned work, written between 1914 and 1917, was a late-flowering interest in astrology. At around this time Holst moved his family from a riverside house at Barnes, where he felt the damp air aggravated his asthma, to Brook Green, very near St Paul's School. Thanks to a love of walking around the countryside he had discovered the landscape of north Essex and from 1917 to 1925 rented a house in Thaxted, where he set up a Whitsun Festival with the support of the vicar of the fine church there, Conrad Noel. Noel was a fervent supporter of the Russian Revolution and too strong meat for Holst's gentle socialism, and in time the composer distanced himself from the clergyman.

Although he tried to volunteer for the Army in the Great War his health was too poor, and it was not until the war was almost over that he was offered something that would help the country directly – as director of music of the Near East division of the YMCA, based in Salonika, and working with troops awaiting demobilisation. He went to Greece shortly after the first performance of *The Planets* in September 1918, and returned the following June.

When back in England he took up his teaching duties and, in addition to his previous commitments, he joined Vaughan Williams as a teacher of composition at the RCM. A change from his pre-war existence was that *The Planets* had made him famous, something he regarded as far from welcome. His celebrity was compounded after 1920 by the success of his choral work *The Hymn of Jesus*, and it caused him to accept an invitation to conduct and lecture in America. He fell off a stage in Reading before he left and cussed himself. The long-term effects of that and the tour exhausted him, and he effectively took a year off in 1924, spending it in Thaxted and narrowing his commitments down solely to St Paul's once he had recovered. This triggered a highly productive period in his writing of music, with his *Choral Symphony*, his orchestral work *Egdon Heath*, his *Humbert Wolfe Songs* and his opera *At The Boar's Head* among the results.

In 1930 he wrote his *Choral Fantasia* and *Hammersmith* and in 1932 crossed the Atlantic again to teach at Harvard; in New York he was reunited with his brother Emil, who had become a Broadway actor and would appear in feature films under the name of Ernest Cossart. However, while in America he was diagnosed with a duodenal ulcer. He returned home in poor health, and one of his final works (a symphony remained incomplete, though its *Scherzo* was released posthumously as a separate piece) was the *Brook Green Suite*, written for the school orchestra at St Paul's. He underwent an operation for his ulcer but was insufficiently strong and died of heart failure afterwards, on 25 May 1934, aged just 59.



The first of the historic performances on these discs, *Sāvītri*, is a chamber opera (Op.25) that Holst worked on in 1908–9, also writing the libretto. He undertook a small-scale revision in 1916, and its first performance was given by a group of amateur musicians in December of that year, the first professional one coming in June 1921. It is taken from the *Mahābhārata*, a Sanskrit epic believed to be the longest poem in the world and dating back around 2,000 years, from the story of Sāvītri and Satyavān about the defeat of death. Critics have suggested that the bitonality of the opening of the work is an illustration of the contrast between life and death. The performers are two string quartets, two flautists, a cor anglais and a double bass, soprano, tenor and baritone. This recording was made at the Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh at the 1956 festival. *Sāvītri* is sung by Arda Mandikian (1924–2009), her husband Satyavān by Peter Pears (1910–1986), and Death by Thomas Hemsley (1927–2013); and the English Opera Group and Chorus are conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras (1925–2010).

The *Four Hymns from the Rig Veda* (Third Group) for Female Voices and Harp, Op.26 (1909–10) was the next work the composer embarked upon after beginning *Sāvitrī* and also reflects his interest in Sanskrit. His pupil Edmund Rubbra saw these hymns as a crucial transitional moment in Holst's style to something truly individual and modern, with the predominantly western classical influence on his music being moderated by Indian influences. Holst's own interests in Indian culture were more to do with mythology than with spirituality, so these "hymns" should not be interpreted as conveying a religious message from the composer, more a series of sound-pictures. The four hymns – *Hymn to the Dawn*, *Hymn to the Waters*, *Hymn to Vena* (The Sun rising through the mist) and *Hymn of the Travellers* – were performed by the Purcell Singers, with Michael Jefferies (harp) and conducted by Imogen Holst, on the evening of 6 July as part of the 1965 Cheltenham Festival. The concert was broadcast from the Town Hall live-to-air on the BBC Radio Third Programme.

The *Four Songs for Voice and Violin*, Op.35, were written in 1916–17, around the time of the revision and first performance of *The Planets*. As with much of Holst's preceding music they are to an extent experiments in modality, and all four settings are of poems from *A Medieval Anthology*. They are *Jesu Sweet, now will I sing*, *My soul has nought but fire and ice*, *I sing of a maiden* and *My Leman is so true*. The soprano Honor Sheppard (1931–2021) is accompanied on the violin by Nona Liddell (1927–2017), leader of the English String Quartet, on this recording, which was featured in one of five BBC radio programmes that Imogen Holst designed to feature the music of her father (along with that of other composers). These songs were included in the third such programme, on 31 October 1965, but may have been recorded in a closed session during the aforementioned Cheltenham Festival season, in July.

The Evening-Watch for unaccompanied mixed chorus with tenor and mezzo-soprano soloists (1924, No.1 of 2 *Motets* Op.43) is based on the poem of the same name (subtitled "A Dialogue") by Henry Vaughan (1622–1695), one of the later English metaphysical poets. It is typical in style of many of the works of Holst's last decade, with a purity born of restraint but leading up to what one critic has called "a blaze of colour" at the end. This recording, by the Purcell Singers with Pauline Stevens, mezzo-soprano, and the tenor Ian Partridge (born 1938), conducted by Imogen Holst, was like the above *Songs* probably made at Cheltenham in July 1965 but broadcast by Imogen, together with the *Songs* and Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, Op.70 (performed by its dedicatee, guitarist Julian Bream), on that same Radio 3 programme of 31 October that year.

Hammersmith: A Prelude and Scherzo for Orchestra, Op.52 developed out of a commission by the BBC Military Band in 1930; the following year Holst orchestrated it, and it is a rare performance of the work for full orchestra that we hear on this disc, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Norman Del Mar (1919–1994) at the 1965 Cheltenham Festival broadcast live-to-air from the Town Hall on BBC Radio 3 on the evening of 9 July. The work had the misfortune to be performed for the first time in its orchestral arrangement in the same concert as the debut of William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* in 1931. It then effectively vanished for over 20 years until the band parts were reassembled in 1954, and it has since, in that format, become central to the repertoire for such ensembles. But this also awakened interest in the orchestral version, which has now been recorded several times. Imogen Holst wrote of her father's "40-year affection" for this riverside district of west London, and it is a dark, deep representation of the river, gliding slowly under the great Hammersmith Bridge, that both opens and closes this masterpiece. "Its mood," Miss Holst continued "is the outcome of long years of familiarity with the changing crowds and the changing river". Moving away from the river, the crowds of people on the Broadway become evident after a piccolo imitates what might be a butcher's boy whistling a popular tune, which is then taken up noisily by the brass, and organised mayhem continues until we return to the serenity of the river again.

The Perfect Fool is the name of a one-act opera by Holst, who also wrote the libretto, composed between 1918 and 1922 and first performed in 1923. The ballet music that opens the work was originally composed as incidental music to *The Sneezing Charm*, a play by Clifford Bax, in that first year of 1918. It was then co-opted for the opera, where it is danced by Spirits of Earth, Water and Fire summoned by a wizard (portrayed by the opening trombone call), and was soon extracted as a separate suite, becoming a popular concert work. It exhibits a mischief and raucous jollity not always associated with this most complex and reflective of composers, whose superior powers of orchestration are seldom better displayed than here. This performance was given on 11 March 1945 by Dr Malcolm Sargent (1895–1967) and the NBC Symphony Orchestra.

Holst began work on *The Planets*, Op.32 just before the outbreak of war in 1914 (with the first movement, "Mars, the Bringer of War", in fact finished before the conflict began). He completed it in early 1917. It was first performed before an invited audience almost as a tribute to the composer in the Queen's Hall in London on 29 September 1918, just as he was about to leave for the YMCA work in Salonika.

The first complete public performance was not given until 1920: the almost experimental nature of some of the music in the seven-part suite made the conductor of the initial private performance, Sir Adrian Boult (1889–1983), nervous about unleashing it all upon the public. Some early critics attacked the radical nature of some of the music, but it has become one of the most famous, most recorded and most performed works in the classical canon, ensuring Holst's immortality. Each of the seven parts is named after a planet and its supposed astrological properties – it was Holst's becoming interested in astrology in 1913 that stimulated his interest in writing such a work, and students of his music attribute its form and original title (in the autograph) – “Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra” – to his interest in Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. The movements are: *Mars, the Bringer of War*; *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*; *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*; *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*; *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*; *Uranus, the Magician*; and *Neptune, the Mystic*. The overall impression was, and remains, one of the work's astonishing invention, originality and power to overwhelm. The performance on this disc was given by Boult, by this stage the work's greatest interpreter, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on 2 February 1946 in the same series as *Job*, which features on the SOMM disc ARIADNE 5018, the second volume in the *Vaughan Williams Live* series issued to mark that composer's 150th anniversary.

Simon Heffer

SĀVITRĪ

Recording (LIVE): Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh, 22 June 1956

CHORAL HYMNS (III) FROM THE RIG VEDA

Recording (LIVE): Town Hall, Cheltenham, 6 July 1965 (BBC Third Programme Aircheck)

4 SONGS FOR SOPRANO & VIOLIN - THE EVENING-WATCH

Recording: 31 October 1965 (BBC Third Programme Aircheck);

Pre-recorded at Town Hall, Cheltenham, July 1965

HAMMERSMITH

Recording (LIVE): Town Hall, Cheltenham, 9 July 1965 (BBC Third Programme Aircheck)

THE PERFECT FOOL

Recording (LIVE): Radio City Studio 8-H, New York, 11 March 1945

THE PLANETS

Recording (LIVE): Symphony Hall, Boston, 2 February 1946

Executive Producer: **Siva Oke**

Producer: **Lani Spahr** (CD 2)

Recordings sourced with thanks to:

Music Preserved (*Sāvitri*);

Stephen Crane (ARS) (BBC Airchecks);

Kevin Mostyn (*The Planets*)

Audio Restoration & Remastering: **Paul Baily** (CD 1) · **Lani Spahr** (CD 2)

Design: **WLP London Ltd**

Editorial: **Ray Granlund**

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Gustav Holst (c.1921) · photo: Herbert Lambert

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FIRST RELEASES

HOLST
150

GUSTAV HOLST 1874-1934

- a* *Sāvītri*: Arda Mandikian *soprano* · Satyavān: Peter Pears *tenor*
Death: Thomas Hemsley *baritone*
English Opera Group Chorus and Orchestra, Sir Charles Mackerras *conductor*
- b* Michael Jefferies *harp* · Purcell Singers, Imogen Holst *conductor*
- c* Honor Sheppard *soprano* · Nona Liddell *violin*
- d* Pauline Stevens *mezzo-soprano* · Ian Partridge *tenor*
Purcell Singers, Imogen Holst *conductor*
- e* BBC Symphony Orchestra, Norman Del Mar *conductor*
- f* NBC Symphony Orchestra, Dr Malcolm Sargent *conductor*
- g* Boston Symphony Orchestra & Women's Chorus, Arthur Fiedler *chorus master*,
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CD 1

- [1]–[17] **Sāvītri H.96** Chamber opera in one act *a* [29:55]
 - [18]–[21] **Choral Hymns from the *Rig Veda* (3rd Group) H.99** *b* [11:41]
 - [22]–[26] **4 Songs H.132** for soprano & violin *c* [7:59]
 - [26] **The Evening-Watch H.159** for mixed chorus *d* 4:46
 - [27] **Hammersmith H.178** *e* 14:45
- Total duration: 69:36**

CD 2

- [1] **The Perfect Fool H.150** *f* 10:30
Ballet suite from the Opera
 - [2]–[8] **The Planets H.125** *g* [48:19]
- Total duration: 58:50**

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ARIADNE

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 - b* Recording (LIVE): Town Hall, Cheltenham, 6 July 1965 (BBC Third Programme Aircheck)
 - cd* Recording: 31 October 1965 (BBC Third Programme Aircheck);
Pre-recorded at Town Hall, Cheltenham, July 1965
 - e* Recording (LIVE): Town Hall, Cheltenham, 9 July 1965 (BBC Third Programme Aircheck)
 - f* Recording (LIVE): Radio City Studio 8-H, New York, 11 March 1945
 - g* Recording (LIVE): Symphony Hall, Boston, 2 February 1946
- Executive Producer: **Siva Oke** · Producer: **Lani Spahr** (CD 2)
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