



Editorial

Gustav Holst: Composer, Performer, and Teacher

By Benjamin Bolden

I recently had the very good fortune to be commissioned to compose a piece for string orchestra in honour of Dr. Patricia Shand, Canadian music education icon and energetic promoter of Canadian composers and music.

My good fortune was doubled when I learned that my composition was to be performed by the superb North Toronto Collegiate String Orchestra. I contacted the ensemble's director, Deborah Pady, to discuss the commission. Not being a string player myself, I admitted that I could really use an exemplar to guide me in my composing. I was craving a piece carefully crafted with an intimate idiomatic understanding of how a string orchestra works – sensitive writing that brought out the best in the instruments and performers. I was hoping to learn from a composer who enabled young or amateur players to grapple with sophisticated and satisfying musical material without overwhelming them with unnecessary technical obstacles.

“Great!” said Deborah. “I know just the piece – you should have a look at Holst's *St. Paul's Suite for String Orchestra*.”

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) composed the suite in 1913 for the St. Paul's Girls' School String Orchestra (an ensemble which he directed), and the piece was and is everything I had hoped for in terms of a brilliant compositional exemplar: orchestral writing both musically rich *and* technically accessible. I had never thought a great deal about Holst as a composer – it seemed to me he was just always *there*. Nothing remarkable, I assumed, just a tireless workhorse of a composer destined to be taken for granted – the composer whose *Second Suite in F for Military Band* (1911) resounds, has resounded, and will resound (I'm sure) for years to come in practice rooms and classrooms and gymnasiums and concert halls clear across the western music education paradigm. Wherever there is band, there is Holst.

But now I have come to realize that Holst really *was* remarkable. There is a very good reason for the ongoing ubiquity of his music; Holst created music that *works* – that brings out the best in instruments and players alike. How did he learn to do this? Why was he able to gain such a rich, practical, and intimate knowledge of music, instruments, and musicians? Two reasons: first of all, Holst was an active performer. And secondly, of course, he was a teacher.

When young Gustav was still a student himself, just nineteen

years old, painful neuritis in his right hand meant that playing the piano and organ was unsustainable. Holst realized he needed a new instrument; he decided to take up the trombone. To finance his schooling Holst played in bands on the Brighton pier and at other seaside holiday resorts, and in the orchestra pit of the pantomimes in London. After five years at the Royal College of Music (where he studied composition with Charles Stanford), Holst was appointed first trombone with the Carl Rosa Opera Company Orchestra. As his daughter Imogen Holst has explained:

That [performing] experience, he said so himself, was one of the most valuable things that ever happened to him...ever after that he thought of the orchestra from the inside, from the *player's* point of view...He'd seen the expressions of disgust from his fellow players when they were suffering from a bad, careless composer or a bad, careless arranger of music. (CBC, 1974)

Holst's playing experiences gave him the ability to understand and to empathize with the needs and desires of performing musicians – it enabled him to create music that makes sense and feels satisfying from *inside* the ensemble. An intensely sensitive individual, Holst learned the tricks of his composing trade by analyzing the musical demands that composers made of his fellow performers, and tuning in to their reactions. Similarly valuable – or, I suspect, even more so – were the musical understandings that Holst accumulated through working with his students.

Like music teachers everywhere, thanks to his students Holst gained knowledge – intimate knowledge – of what musically works and blatantly does not. Holst taught music at both St. Paul's Girls' School and Morley College for Working Men and Women throughout his composing career. Although the teaching consumed his time, it helped to make him “the most practical of craftsmen...never jaded his joy in music, or curbed his imagination...he was a musician with his feet on the ground, his back to the wheel, and his head in the clouds” (CBC, 1974).

Holst did not only bring considerable creative genius to his composing, but also to his work in teaching and learning. Like all the best educational experiences, those Holst provided were infused with creativity. A former pupil explained:

He was very vivacious in his teaching... Holst himself thought of teaching as a creative task; so he really did make it a very important part of his life, and enjoyed it

the prelude

editorial

too, I think... He was very unorthodox as a teacher, very unexpected, in everything he said or did. And any of us who have ever made music with him will never forget the thrill. (CBC, 1974)

Throughout his life Holst took great delight in working with amateurs. An oft-quoted aphorism communicates his staunch belief that “if a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly.” For Gustav Holst, great music was meant to be performed by all, certainly not to be reserved for the professionals. As another of his former students explained, he was

...a genius of a teacher...a teacher of *amateurs*, whether children or grown up. His genius was to encourage everyone – whether they were so-called gifted, or not – to enjoy making music. He never turned away a singer or a player because they weren’t good enough. (CBC, 1974)

So Holst taught. And after school and on weekends he composed – Holst’s extraordinary musical imagination took flight. His break-through hit, the seven-movement orchestral suite, *The Planets*, was composed between 1914 and 1916. (Where would film music be without this brilliantly orchestrated prototype for soundtracks such as *Star Wars* and *Superman*?)

In 1934, after a rich career of composing and teaching, Holst passed away at the age of 59. Ralph Vaughn Williams, colleague and friend, spoke movingly of Holst’s sympathetic humanity, and how it influenced his composing, teaching, and friendships:

...it was his intense human sympathy that fostered his musical inventions. It was the same spur of sympathy that made him at once a teacher and a friend. He could not but be friends with those whom he taught. Similarly, he could not help, by his very presence, teaching those who were his friends. (CBC, 1974)

There is much I have learned to admire about Gustav Holst, and much I feel I can learn from his example. He was a richly multi-faceted musician and educator who always remained in contact with the nuts and bolts of musical life. He brought artistry and creativity to both his composing and his teaching. He was an unassuming and pragmatic genius whose imaginative creations changed the musical world while he continued to step out in front of amateurs and students, raise his baton, and revel in good music played badly.

Journal Issues

I have had the privilege of editing this journal now for four years. In order to ensure that the journal serves CMEA members as effectively as possible, I have recently begun, with the assistance of the CMEA Publications Advisory Committee, a process of re-visioning and renewal. Our goal is to continue to produce a quality publication that is both valued by and valuable for our readers.

I hope very much that you, readers of the *Canadian Music Educator*, will assist in the process of renewal by providing feedback. We seek to know your opinions on anything and every-

thing to do with the journal: content, images, design, layout, formatting, distribution, etc. Please let us know what you would like us to keep, what you would like us to change, and how the journal might serve you better. We invite you to send your thoughts to: benbolden@gmail.com, or to Ed Wasiak, chair of the Publications Advisory Committee: edwin.wasiak@uleth.ca.

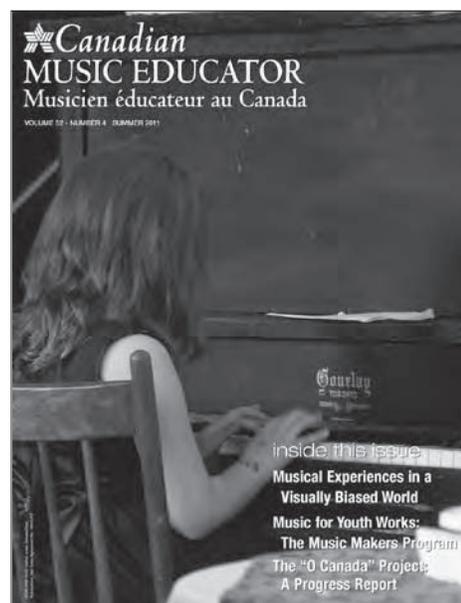
One step along this road of renewal was prompted by CMEA member Simon Forst, who requested that we make it possible for members to receive electronic rather than printed issues of the journal (thereby saving trees, money, and energy). I am pleased to report that we are now ready to provide this service. If you would prefer to receive an e-issue rather than a printed one, please send the request as soon as possible to our new membership coordinator, David Gueulette: dgueulette@ashbury.ca. We will then remove your name from the postal mailing list and, when an issue is ready for distribution, email you a link to a downloadable PDF of the issue instead. CME

Please respond through the ether to: benbolden@gmail.com

Reference

CBC Tuesday Night. (1974). Gustav Holst: Planet Maker.” *CBC Radio Podcast*. Podcast retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/andthewinneris/2010/10/gustav-holst-planetmaker.html>

on the cover



Music for Youth Works: The Music Makers Program