The Operas of Gustav Holst

by

Natalie Artemas-Polak

Volume One

Originally Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Music and Sound Recording
School of Arts, Communication and Humanities
University of Surrey

November 2006
© Natalie Artemas-Polak 2006
Abstract

Gustav Holst was a contributor to the genre of English opera throughout his career. His name is not usually associated with opera, and yet he composed thirteen in all; five were published, three are lost, and the remaining five exist solely in manuscript.

The dissertation begins with Holst’s background and influences, the most important of which were the music of Sullivan and Wagner, and the ways in which Holst’s music of his early period imitated those styles.

Other aspects with which Holst came into contact are discussed here; namely Sanskrit literature, the English folksong movement, and the re-discovery of the English madrigal. Each is examined separately in order to clarify how each influenced his music during the early years of the twentieth century.

The earliest operas are presented in chronological order and discussed in terms of their subjects, harmonic and thematic approaches, style and form, as well as a comparison in style between the operas that were composed concurrently.

The core of the work consists of the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters wherein Holst’s final attempt at Wagnerian chromaticism (and his only attempt at large-scale three act opera) and its lack of success is presented. It is linked to a masterpiece of chamber opera of three years later by way of a song cycle for solo voice and piano which clearly demonstrates his new approach to the setting of text, his use of modality and the paring down of accompaniment to give emphasis to the voice.

The final chapter deals with the late period of Holst’s operatic writing and discusses the three comic operas. Holst’s humour and its effect on choice of subject, setting of text and orchestral effects is put into the context of the post-war era.
# Table of Contents

## Volume One

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ iv

Chapter One  
Holstian Heroes: Sullivan and Wagner ............................................................... 1

Chapter Two  
Mosaic of Influences—beyond Bayreuth: Sharp, Weelkes  
and the Māhābhārata ........................................................................ 24

Chapter Three  
The Student Years: Operatic Juvenilia...................................................... 38

Chapter Four  
“As for Opera, I am Bewildered”: Sīta, op 23 ............................................. 65

Chapter Five  
Vedic Hymns, op 24: The Path to Śāvitrī....................................................... 98

Chapter Six  
“Life is Thine in All its Fullness”: Śāvitrī, op 25........................................ 120

Chapter Seven  
A New Direction: Comedy and Parody after World War I ..................... 159

Epilogue .............................................................................................................. 208

Bibliographical Sources ..................................................................................... 212

## Volume Two

Examples

Appendix I: The Operas (1892-1930)  
Appendix II: Sanskrit Sources  
Appendix III: Synopses  
Appendix IV: Sīta Facsimile Pages
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I wish to extend to my supervisor Professor Sebastian Forbes my gratitude for all his help and support. His vast knowledge has been a constant source of inspiration.

I would also like to thank Novello, Faber, Oxford University Press, Curwen, Boosey & Hawkes and Stainer & Bell for their kind permission in allowing me to quote from their published scores.

The same appreciation goes to the British Library for access to numerous unpublished, original manuscripts. Examples copied by hand from original manuscripts have all been reproduced with the permission of the British Library Board.

Special thanks go to Rosamund Strode, Holst Librarian at the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh, for her keen interest in my project, as well as her help in setting me on my way.

I am indebted to my parents, Irina and Gus Polak, whose love and morale-building support has been unshakable throughout my time of study and research, as always. I am also indebted to our family friend Mr. Jan Hoare for his help in many matters during my time at the University of Surrey. Finally, my gratitude also extends to friends and teaching colleagues who have all taken a keen interest.
1. Holstian Heroes: Sullivan and Wagner

Holst believed that all a composer can do is to carry on writing, committed to his own ideals, in the belief that one day his work will come to be appreciated by listeners...

Short, 1990, p 3

It is fortunate that Holst held fast to his convictions in this respect—convictions that were formed in his mind by his own nature, and supported by principles found in the Indian epic writing the Bhaghavad Gîtā, which he espoused in his late twenties. For, in spite of several works that have found their secure and rightful place in the concert repertoire, there is a wealth of music that is neglected, for the most part, as well as many manuscripts that have remained unpublished since the time of their composition or revision. This is, sadly, a state of affairs not much different from his own time: in a tribute to Holst shortly after his death by Arthur Bliss entitled “A Lonely Figure in Music” Bliss wrote, “[Holst’s] total output...is extremely varied, ranging over many fields of interest, and including operas, ballets, orchestral and church works, songs and piano pieces. Much of it is relatively unknown to concert-goers” (Bliss 1934, p 819). Bliss also emphasises the point that Holst is known to the world mainly as the composer of The Planets and The Hymn of Jesus.

Holst’s name is still inextricably linked with the seven-movement suite The Planets op 32, the work which found such favour with the public, critics and publishers, and which catapulted him, quite reluctantly, into fame. Whereas there is no doubt that The Planets is one of the very finest and beloved masterpieces of orchestral writing, its popularity has tended to obscure other Holst compositions of equal, or possibly of greater, importance. A more comprehensive study of Holst’s other repertoire is
necessary for the purpose of familiarisation with his total output and to understand his role within the evolution of musical thought in the early twentieth century. In particular, opera is a genre not immediately associated with him, and yet he was a prolific opera composer.

Writers on Holst generally feel that he managed to alienate his public and the critics during the 1920s with ideas and sonorities that were too challenging for the audiences of the time (I. Holst, 1938; Demuth, 1952; I. Holst, 1974b; Short, 1990; Holmes, 1997). The public was disappointed when, attending performances of his new works, they no longer heard the sound that they had come to perceive as ‘Holstian’. Why did he not reproduce something akin to the magnificent Planets, or something brimming with folk tunes and rhythms like A Somerset Rhapsody? The problem stemmed from the fact that they were experiencing the works of a ground-breaking musical thinker, a “powerful medium of contemporary musical thought” as Bliss described him (Bliss, 1921, p 523). His exposure in the concert halls suffered as it does today; witness Bliss’s remark that for “every one performance of a Holst we have ten of a Mendelssohn” (Bliss 1921, p 523).¹

Holst’s innovative spirit could be encapsulated in his motto “Do something you have never done before!” (Holst, cited in Short 1990, p 3). He was a maverick composer who explored many musical avenues and different genres. It is interesting to note that, unlike his immediate predecessors as well as his contemporaries, Holst seemed determined to steer clear of the established classical forms which might have meant adherence to predetermined structures to which he would be expected to conform. A

¹ This is possibly a testament to the popularity of Mendelssohn at the time.
careful look at the output of his early career reveals that he was drawn to forms that were freer in construction, such as symphonic poems and songs or hymns. Arnold Whittall (1999b, pp 68-9) feels that “[Holst] would probably be ranked much higher if he had found accepted forms more attractive and relatively radical harmonic devices less appealing.” This assertion is problematical inasmuch as it would have been the treatment of his musical material rather than the chosen forms that would have determined his “success”; also, Holst was not alone among his contemporaries in the exploration of “radical harmonic devices” and this did not presage musical downfall for all creative artists.

Holst’s earliest compositions, although not widely known or recognised, are of fundamental importance because they shed light on what motivated him to compose. They are, for the most part, vocal works, inspired by texts, the content of which he felt the need to express. His earliest extant work was an attempt at a setting of Macaulay’s *Horatius*, in 1887, which he decided would be a cantata for chorus and orchestra. It is fascinating to think of a thirteen-year-old boy, as yet without training in harmony, counterpoint or orchestration, being moved to express verses in music on such a grand scale (1.1). Not long after, in 1892, came Holst’s first opera, performed in his native town of Cheltenham, and with that, Holst’s self-expression in this medium began, even prior to his days as a student at the Royal College of Music.

It can be argued that Holst’s main musical impetus was the human voice and the characterisation of which it is capable. “Holst was a composer for voices and instruments who found himself drawn to operatic projects, mostly of an unusual

---

2 A fuller discussion of this work is found in chapter three.
nature” (Ottaway 1974, p 473). His work in this genre covered the extent of his entire compositional career with only minor exceptions. The longest “opera-deprived” period was eight years between the completion of Sāvitrī in 1909 and his spoof of the genre Opera as She is Wrote of 1917-18, composed for his ‘Morleyites’ to help alleviate the stresses of war time. When not actually working on an opera, ideas and sketches for new ones were almost constantly in his mind and in his sketchbooks. Therefore, in terms of creativity, opera was a steady stream that permeated his thoughts. The essential Holst is found in his operas, of which there were thirteen, and a careful study of these operas is necessary, both for the fact that they are neglected works and, more significantly, that they were the focus of his musical thought throughout his career.

For a composer whose livelihood did not revolve around opera (as did Wagner’s or Verdi’s, for example) Holst’s yield was comparatively plentiful. He had a predilection for chamber opera with one major exception. Although the majority of his operatic compositions were concentrated in his youth it is still interesting to note that in a career that spanned just over forty years there would have been an average of approximately one opera every three years. None of the operas was commissioned; quite a few were never even performed, and most of the time those that were performed were not successful with the critics or the public. Nevertheless, Holst had an inner need for creation in this genre, and the reception and perception of his operas by the listening public was of little consequence to him. It is also intriguing to realise that he maintained such zeal for a genre in a country that had declared itself generally uninterested in opera for many generations.
The operas of Holst are divisible chronologically into three general periods: firstly, the early endeavours, i.e. the first seven operas written by the age of twenty-eight; secondly, the two Sanskrit operas that, although they overlap in time to a certain degree with the previous category, are unique for their origins and libretti, and vividly display Holst’s struggle to liberate himself from past influences of harmonic and melodic thought leading to the attainment of his musical maturity; thirdly, the final four operas that reveal the mature Holst, but in a comic vein.

Understandably the term “rhetoric” has been used in discussion of Holst’s music, rhetoric in music being the interrelationship between music and the spoken arts; until fairly late in the history of Western civilization music was predominantly vocal and, therefore, bound to words. Since, as noted above, Holst’s main impetus was the voice and the characterisation of which it is capable, then rhetoric surely applies to his vocal and instrumental output. Within the last decade there has been interesting work done by Richard Greene on the rhetorical nature of Holst’s orchestral music. Basically, Greene posits that two major points must be established in order to study Holst’s rhetorical method: Holst meant to communicate, through musical terms, some matter of interest or concern to him, and that his efforts to do this were, in some way, consistent, if varied. His music “had to grow, in all its elements, from the original inspiration; and...his music was meant as an embodiment of musical character” (Greene 1994, p 13). Therefore form was “molded [sic] to content and...existed only to express that particular content” (Greene 1994, p 13). The subservience of the form of a work to its contents could explain Holst’s lack of interest in traditional forms.
The hypothesis that Holst’s musical rhetoric is based on character is an exciting one: if the orchestral works are inspired by musical metaphor and musical character, then the fundamental drive of this composer is quite logically that of dramatic narrative. This, along with his need for composing in the medium of opera in the face of public disfavour, points one in the direction of Holst’s preoccupation with dramatic subjects and the inspiration they stirred within him. Thus, opera becomes an important area of investigation with regard to the essence of Gustav Holst.

This essence of Holst needs to be seen at its core, that is, the elements that first inspired him to think along the dramatic lines, which would govern his overall musical thinking. Sources agree that there were several composers whose work stimulated Holst’s imagination but, in terms of his operas, none more so than Arthur Sullivan for the earliest endeavours and, beginning with his student years, Richard Wagner.

The success of the creations of Gilbert and Sullivan, i.e. operatic works, was something unique in that England was considered “the ‘land without music’, or at any rate without music of its own” (Raynor, p 137). There was not a particularly supportive climate for opera seria in England at this time; by the end of the nineteenth century it was the music hall comedies with their popular tunes performed in English that won the enthusiasm of the English public (Banfield, p 214). The music of English composers generally meant very little to their fellow countrymen, and they were considered irrelevant “once they stepped outside the music hall” (Raynor, p 164).
...English opera- and concert-goers depended on foreign visitors for exciting, ambitious work and left the native composer to carry out the routine theatrical jobs which depended upon the quality and originality of the plays to which they worked, and the theatre was not offering any musician new and stimulating drama to deal with.

Raynor, p 138

So theatre was not offering “new and stimulating drama” with which to work; however, the main interest of musical cultural life resided in all manner of choral music. Oratorios, masses, church music in general nourished the need of the great number of choral societies developing across the nation. Choral festivals such as Birmingham and Norwich became quite famous and, to the benefit of practising composers of the time, were in need of material to perform; hence frequent commissions for choral music. Thus, an English composer’s breakthrough came in the form of the choral societies and festivals willing to investigate contemporary ideas in the new cantatas and oratorios required in order for them to flourish.

Musical theatre did exist and prospered well in the music hall, as mentioned above. The height of operatic experience for the English came in the works of Sullivan and his collaboration with W.S. Gilbert. According to Percy M. Young, Sullivan “redeemed [music in Britain] from the bondage of sententiousness” (1971, p 505).

His posthumous reputation depends entirely on his operettas, in which he demonstrated beyond doubt that ebullience and sparkle, and even wit, were valuable and (since response to them was immediate) indigenous qualities within the collective musical character of his fellow-countrymen...Sullivan shone as an entertainer. When he put off the motley and tried to play the tragic or even the merely solemn role he failed...

Young 1971, p 505

---

3 This could be the reason for the description given to England as the “land without music”.

Sullivan opened up the possibilities of a “broader and livelier musical attitude” whose first operetta *Cox and Box* (1867, to F.C. Burnand’s libretto) revealed a style which was, very appropriately, “neat, singable and theatrical” (Raynor, p 171-72).

As a very young man, prior to his attending the Royal College of Music, Sullivan was Holst’s musical hero, and it was at least one enthusiasm he could share freely with his father (unlike Holst’s fervour for Grieg and Mendelssohn). This comes as no surprise since, as far as musical stage productions in England were concerned, the art of Gilbert and Sullivan was the apex of this genre and immensely popular at the time when Holst was growing up. His early operas show the unmistakeable influence of these contemporary masters of comic opera. It is an indication that the young composer most probably attended a good number of performances in order to have absorbed the idiom so thoroughly. We are forced to speculate on this point for unfortunately, unlike some composers, Holst did not keep a diary as such other than a notebook in which he recorded the titles of his compositions as they were completed, as well as sketchbooks in which he jotted down musical fragments and snatches of themes as they came to him, most often during his long walks.

What was so aesthetically satisfying to Holst about Sullivan’s music? A general description of Sullivan’s style by Percy M. Young may give an indication.

[Sullivan] preferred economy of statement to diffusiveness. He had a gift for perceiving and expressing the direct connection between words and music, and correlative talent for understanding the principles of melodic design. He was naturally inclined to reduce rhythmic factors to the elements of dance. He was intuitive in execution and readily avoided what he saw in others as pedantry.

1971, p 69
It is highly likely that Holst was aware of many elements in Sullivan's musical character that appealed particularly to him and that in his fervour he tried to emulate him. Young's observations pertaining to Sullivan's music are extraordinarily similar to the perception of Holst's music by contemporary and later writers, and mirror some of Holst's own views on composition. For example, Imogen Holst describes Holst's chief musical characteristic as "directness of expression". She asserted that he "aimed at clear thinking and clear feeling" and that he "hated conventionality". With respect to dance, she stated that "lack of rhythm was one of the few things that made him really angry, for rhythm mattered to him more than anything else in life" (Holst, I. 1980, p 153). Michael Short describes Holst's music as functional, and points out that "this functionalism was rooted in clarity and directness of expression" (Short 1990, p 347). He responded to text by keeping the shape of his music closely related to the vision of the words (Holst, I. 1986, p 49).

Arthur Jacobs (2001, p 703) provides some general observations on the musical style of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas: the roles in these works do not require singers with experience of grand opera, which is why amateur groups and school groups perform them so successfully. Neither is there a demand for orchestral virtuosity, and a relatively basic but small force of instruments will suffice; there is flexibility in the scoring as well. These smaller, adaptable orchestras also conveyed a sense of concision that was in line with the trend toward chamber opera. The operettas are two-act works modelled on those of Rossini, in that a crucial point of the drama is

---

4 There is a direct link here between Sullivan and Holst in that much of Holst's vocal work was composed for student performers as well as amateurs; with regard to scoring Holst often provided alternate parts or suggestions for different instruments if the original was not available.
reached by the end of the first act, followed by a somewhat formulaic, even predictable second act finale.

One of the Sullivan trademarks has been referred to by Jacobs as the "counterpoint of characters" in which the thematic presentation of different individuals first occurs independently, after which these themes are brought together. A most effective example of this is to be found in *The Mikado* (Act I, no 10 "I am so proud"—"My brain it teems"—"I heard one day") in a trio involving Ko-Ko, Pooh-Bah and Pish-Tush. Sullivan makes clever use of this as well in *Pirates of Penzance* (Act I, no 10 "How beautifully blue the sky") during which the chorus sings its theme in two-four time, and Mabel and Frederic counter with a different waltz theme in three-four. Holst’s fondness for the Sullivan sound reveals itself unmistakeably in *Lansdown Castle*, his first stage work dating from 1892, and he attempts his own counterpoint of characters in what he called the “Nagging Trio” (the early operas will be discussed in chapter 3; refer here to example 3.1).

In *The Mikado* (“A More Humane Mikado”, no 17 from Act II) the Mikado sings of “masses and fugues and ops by Bach interwoven with Spohr and Beethoven at classical Monday Pops”. Here the unassuming first clarinet and bassoon are heard quoting from Bach’s Great Organ Fugue in G minor BWV 542. Holst very likely knew this operetta and, as an organist, would certainly have appreciated the musical innuendo; in *Lansdown Castle* he borrowed an Anglican chant, re-fashioned it, and transformed it into a wizard’s magic incantation (refer to 3.3).
Possibly the most easily recognisable of the Gilbert and Sullivan musical elements is the style of “patter” singing used so frequently. Examples here abound, such as in Ruddigore (Act I, no 14 “You understand? I think I do”) and the highly effervescent “My name is John Wellington Wells” from The Sorcerer. Holst seemed to take delight in this style of singing and it occurs frequently in the early stage works\(^5\), such as, again, the “Nagging Trio” from Lansdown Castle, which is a particularly successful example.

Holst also had something of a predilection for the names of the *dramatis personae* in the Gilbert and Sullivan works; for Lansdown Castle he chose a libretto peopled by the likes of Lady Isabel, Lady Rigmaree, Lord Raymond, Sir Rigmarole, Sir Rigmaree, Baron Proser, and a sorcerer by the name of Hocus Pocus. This calls to mind Ruddigore: Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd, Richard Dauntless, Sir Despurd Murgatroyd, Old Adam Goodheart, Rose Maybud, Mad Margaret, Dame Hannah, Zorah and Ruth (as well as the assorted generations of Murgatroyd ghosts).

Sullivan was prized as a melodist and excelled in individual numbers (solos, ensembles, choruses).\(^6\) The melodies and their harmonic underpinning captured the expressive movement of dramatic turn of events. All the later, longer operettas included speech. As will be seen in the third chapter these characteristics will apply to Holst’s earliest endeavours.

---

\(^5\) In 1896 Holst composed *The Idea* and began work on *The Magic Mirror*. In the first, patter singing was still used and the work had something of the Gilbert and Sullivan sound. It was meant for children and its style contributed to the fun and comic aspects of the story. With its drama and tragic forebodings *The Magic Mirror* was handled quite differently, and it was at this point that Holst’s use of patter singing ended.

\(^6\) *Lansdown Castle* and *The Idea* were the only operettas of Holst that imitated Sullivan by numbering the songs, etc individually.
Apart from *The Youth's Choice* and *The Magic Mirror*, the early operas continually demonstrated evidence of Sullivan's style and treatment of text. Issues of rhythm, directness of expression and economy, therefore, were characteristics that the two composers shared; however, Holst may have felt that setting the text could be even more supple, and found the answer in the use of irregular metres. "He was...particularly careful about rhythmic matters in word setting, and came to believe that asymmetrical metres allowed a wider variety of word-stress than more common times" (Short 1990, p 443). Even though Sullivan’s music appealed to Holst as a student, he eventually found it wanting and was compelled to take certain elements further. He never lost the Sullivanesque “talent for understanding the principles of melodic design”. On the other hand, the factor of social commentary and satire, so prevalent in the work of Gilbert and Sullivan, never seemed to appeal to Holst. From the beginning he was more concerned with aspects of the fantastic, even though in the early period they were of a more juvenile nature compared with the later sophistication of translating and setting Sanskrit epic poetry or tales from Hindu mythology.

Holst was a member of the generation of composers who were unavoidably influenced by Wagner, and he was destined to follow the same path; he came under Wagner’s spell as a student during the time that he was struggling to find his own distinctive voice. He inevitably had to shake off the Wagnerian musical idiom as did contemporaries such as Debussy and Schoenberg, to name only two of many. However, this was not to happen right away: like many, Holst began as a devoted Wagnerite who only later realised the “danger” he was in with regard to his personal development. In the days of the early operas (which will be discussed in detail in
Chapter 3) such as *The Magic Mirror* (1896, abandoned) with its clashing chromaticism, dense harmonies and highly dramatic stage directions regarding lighting effects, etc., it was clear that Holst “was helpless in the throes of Wagner-worship...Wagner’s music was continually with him, swirling round and round in his brain and shuddering through every nerve of his body. He not only dreamed Wagner, he moved Wagner, he ate and drank Wagner and took in huge draughts of Wagner with every gasp of air he breathed...” (Holst, I., 1986, p 4). It is only fitting that one should delve in general into the atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Europe so that Holst can be placed in the context of post-Wagnerian Europe in order to understand more clearly the cultural environment in which he found himself as a young composer at the beginning of his career.

When a genius as powerful, as dominating as Richard Wagner appears in the world, he gives off so much splendour that after him there follows a kind of darkness...hence general uncertainty, gropings, attempts in all directions in order to try to escape from the crushing glory which seems to obstruct every road.

Ernest Chausson, cited in Holloway, 1979, p 13

In his grievance regarding Wagner’s impact on musical creativity Chausson reflected the situation of many of Europe’s contemporary composers. Of all those who have shaped the path of musical history few have been as influential as Richard Wagner. It is, in fact, impossible to trace the path of music through the nineteenth into the twentieth century without taking into account the tremendous sway that Wagner’s music and philosophy held over European culture.

The concept of ‘Wagnerism’ reached beyond solely musical spheres; the composer himself was also a philosopher with numerous essays to his credit, many to do with
the role of art in society. Wagner's extensive influence on contemporary thought can be measured by the numerous cultural figures that held very strong opinions for or against him. Many were great supporters of his art such as Liszt, Wolf and Bruckner, as well as Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns and Grieg who were among the first to hear the Ring cycle.

An equally impressive collection of detractors existed at the other end of the scale. Critics such as Fétis, Hanslick and Davison saw Wagner as a threat to the established classical virtues; thinkers as diverse as Marx, Tolstoy, Ruskin and William Morris "remained unconvinced of his genius" (Millington, p 995). Undoubtedly Nietzsche became one of the most outspoken of Wagner's critics. He looked upon Wagner as a kind of fraud: "Is Wagner even human? Is he not an illness instead? Everything he touches is tainted. He has made music ill" (Nietzsche, p 912). Nietzsche also saw him as one whose gigantic will forced the hands of others who were powerless to stand up against it. He had views on specific elements of the Wagnerian style, and denounced endless melody simply as "incessant, but without melody" (Nietzsche, p 914). He compared it with the sensation of being in the sea: "that one enters the sea, little by little loses one's sure foothold on the bottom and at length surrenders oneself to the mercy or disfavour of the elements: one must swim" (Nietzsche, p 1043). The intensity of feeling displayed in Nietzsche's denunciations continued after the death of Wagner and showed an almost neurotic fear, and his diatribes have been attributed to neurosis and, ultimately, insanity (Millington, p 955). But he was a

\[7\text{‘Ist Wagner überhaupt ein Mensch? Ist er nicht eher eine Krankheit? Er macht alles krank, woran er rührt—er hat die Musik krank gemacht—’ (Der Fall Wagner, p 912: author’s translation).}\]

\[8\text{‘...Unendlichkeit, aber ohne Melodie.’ (Der Fall Wagner, p 914: author’s translation).}\]

\[9\text{‘...daß man ins Meer geht, allmählich den sicheren Schritt auf dem Grunde verliert und sich endlich dem Elemente auf Gnade und Ungnade übergibt: man soll schwimmen’ (Nietzsche Contra Wagner, p 1043: author’s translation).}\]
staunch advocate in the early days with writings such as Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (1872) which championed the cause. By about 1876, after publication of Richard Wagner in Bayreuth, it became increasingly difficult to support the composer so completely. Following the publication of Nietzsche Contra Wagner in 1887 and Der Fall Wagner ('The Case of Wagner') a year later, Nietzsche was verbally condemning Wagner's claim to greatness.

Strong views were voiced by a large number of composers of this period who, whether they felt that Wagner's influence on music was for good or ill, saw him as an overwhelming force with which they had to contend. Wagnerian music drama became, in its extreme state, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there was the great desire in some composers to work along the same lines, thereby acknowledging Wagnerism as the inevitable path to the future; others wished to avoid this tidal wave of compositional idealism for fear of losing their identity and independence of creative thought. Among the latter group were those who had begun as supporters of the Wagnerian cause and had subsequently lost faith in it. It is therefore not difficult to comprehend an artistic climate, which at any given moment was rife with violently opposing points of view on the matter of opera or music drama and how to approach it. With hindsight it is clear that the mid- to late nineteenth century was a phase of musical turmoil—a state of restlessness in which artists were struggling to find their own voices (the concept of the Individual in Art being a very important issue during this period). For those who disapproved of Wagner's influence this was definitely the time for the assertion of an individual style, backed by a strongly felt need to resist all that was deemed Wagnerian (and that could, on occasion, cause dissention among the
concert-going public as well as between artists themselves). Evidence of this could be seen in most European countries that enjoyed established traditions of opera.

From the names already listed it is clear that the issue of Wagner crossed national boundaries and elicited reaction not only from composers but philosophers, literary figures and even painters of the time, and Wagner’s influence extended into the early years of the twentieth century:

The young Richard Strauss was nicknamed ‘Richard the Second’. Elgar loved only one opera, Parsifal, and his masterpiece, The Dream of Gerontius, is in every bar the work of a man who loved Parsifal. Schoenberg by the age of 25 had seen Wagner’s operas between twenty and thirty times each, and the music he wrote at that time was Wagner-sodden. Long afterwards some of the most beautiful music of his pupils was still, in spite of the revolution they had made, thoroughly Wagnerian—for instance some of the songs of Alban Berg. The young Debussy, the young Sibelius, the young Delius, the young Holst, the young Bartók—Wagnerians all.

Magee, 1988, p 54

A brief overview of the musical scene in Europe reveals that Wagner had his champions in countries wherein his music would have been deemed out of character with the prevailing style.

The operas of Wagner’s middle period stayed within the style of German Romantic opera, but it was Das Rheingold that changed “the course of the history not only of opera but of music in general” (Finscher, p 726). The influence of Wagner moved beyond the sphere of music by including the arts in general, philosophy and politics. Fellow German composers were less likely than their European counterparts to try to imitate Wagner directly; elements of his technique, such as the leitmotif, did however find their way into other genres. Literary aspects of the libretti from the Ring onwards
did encourage what has been called ‘literary opera’ such as Richard Strauss’s *Salome* of 1905.

Despite Wagner’s lack of fondness for the country, France nevertheless became a significant site of Wagnerism around the 1880s. His music became part of the French orchestral repertoire and later of the operatic repertoire due mainly to the endeavours of conductors like Edouard Colonne and Charles Lamoureux. A journal dedicated to the maverick, the *Revue wagnérienne*, was founded in 1895 by Wagner devotee Edouard Dujardin. Symbolist poets took up Wagner’s cause in France as well as in Russia, where there was a wave of symbolist idealism around the turn of the century. The Symbolists were attracted by the concept of ‘total art’ expounded by Wagner and attended performances of Wagner’s music at the Concerts Lamoureux.

Public acclaim for Verdi’s art made him the most important figure in Italian opera by about the middle of the nineteenth century. After approximately 1860 opposition from the younger generation to Verdi’s music became evident; interest focussed on music from other parts of Europe including Germany and its chamber and symphonic music. Wagner’s dramatic ideals were especially appealing, even in a country that as yet knew very little of his music other than, for example, the overtures to *Tannhäuser* and *Der fliegende Holländer*.

Wagner’s sway was also felt as far east as Russia, at a time when its composers had not yet unearthed the potential of their literature and folk music as possible material on which to base compositions. Italian opera was popular, possibly due to Mikhail Glinka whose sojourn in Italy proved to be productive in exposing him to this national
art form. Upon his return to his homeland, he brought with him his experiences of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and Zingarelli to name but a few. He was destined to bring Italian opera to Russia at the same time as developing his own theories of a national opera that would celebrate Russian historical and literary figures. At the beginning of Rimsky-Korsakov’s career there existed relatively few Russian operas, but by the end of his life opera was thriving. He was above all an operatic composer inspired by different styles and wide-ranging taste in subject material—a master of the fairy-tale and the dramatic, the through-composed and the “numbers” opera, the recitative-based and the lyrical, and music which was densely leitmotivic as well as those with a more lenient approach to thematic material.

Now that Russia was familiar with the genre of opera through the art of Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakov the way was clear for other outside influences; Wagnerian music drama was destined to be among them. In Russia around the middle of the century his writings preceded performances of his music dramas and were found to be somewhat inflammatory, particularly *Art and Revolution* and *The Art-work of the Future*. Even though there would have been little chance of their being published in Russian due to difficulties with censorship, they engendered enough interest for people to want to hear his music. In fact the first public performance of Wagner in Russia took place on 15 March, 1856 with the overture to *Tannhäuser* performed by the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Society. Russia had its first opportunity to hear some of Wagner’s complete music dramas in February 1889 when Neumann, then the director of the German opera in Prague, brought his touring company to St. Petersburg. Within the span of approximately one month the *Ring* cycle had been performed four times, each time to a sold-out house. Unlike Mahler’s performances in London where all the
singers and musicians were German (of which more later), the orchestra and chorus at the St. Petersburg events were Russian. Neumann was highly impressed with the Russian chorus, even pronouncing that it was the best that he had ever heard, presumably anywhere (Bartlett, p 46). The performances made a great impression on the writers, artists and composers who heard them: “Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov went as far as attending every single rehearsal” (Bartlett, p 47).

The spiritual element of Wagner’s art appealed strongly to those who followed the Symbolist-inspired movement that was popular at the turn of the century (Millington, p 956). “None of the major Russian composers at the beginning of the twentieth century managed to escape Wagner’s influence, even if it was a passing phase for most of them” (Bartlett, p 114).

With regard to England, Wagner’s first visit to London was in 1839, when he arrived as a virtual unknown. Through knowledge of him gleaned from abroad, supporters and detractors were discussing him; he was considered “notorious by 1855, and more notorious after having given...eight concerts” (Sessa, 1979, p 25). Critics tended to agree that his conducting was unimpressive and the selections from Tannhäuser and Lohengrin were considered strident. During the 1850s and 1860s there were no public performances of the music dramas; however, the writings, such as Opera and Drama, were being published in instalments in the Musical World. Other articles of his appeared in periodicals, and it was left to friends and supporters to plead for his cause in England while he himself was not in the country, and before a substantial amount of his work had even been heard. Again, as in other countries, Wagner’s written
works preceded the performances of his music dramas, and many had formed their opinions of him before even having heard a note of his music.

In England in 1873 the Wagner Society was formed, the founder of which was Edward Dannreuther and the first secretary Franz Hueffer, critics who supported Wagner in the press. Thanks to this exposure and to performers of the time Wagner’s orchestral works were firmly parts of the concert repertoire by 1874 (the year of Holst’s birth). The music dramas, curiously enough, were not yet well known. The eventual popularity of Wagner in England was due to the efforts of advocates whose exertions preceded the music dramas themselves. In the Monthly Musical Record of 1873 Dannreuther wrote a series of essays on Wagner collectively entitled Richard Wagner: His Tendencies and Theories in which he blamed Wagner’s earlier unpopularity on “the publication of his theories before his later musical works were known, his social and political heresies, and his attacks on living men of repute” (Dannreuther, paraphrased in Sessa, p 30). Finally, in 1875 Lohengrin was performed in London both at Covent Garden and at Her Majesty’s Theatre. The arguments continued, but finally the music dramas were being heard.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century is, of course, the period that saw the birth, education and early career of Gustav Holst up to the beginning of his work on The Planets, during which he both came under the spell of Wagner and later strived to overcome his powerful influence. Holst began composing as a student in what he perceived to be the Wagnerian style, but his first encounter with Wagner occurred
well before attending the Royal College. In 1892\(^\text{10}\) he went from Cheltenham to London to hear \textit{Die Götterdämmerung} conducted by Mahler at Covent Garden—the first complete performance of the \textit{Ring} cycle that was given in London. Mahler had taken up post as chief conductor at the Hamburg Stadttheater; he ended his first year at Hamburg by taking his orchestra and singers to participate in a six-week German opera season in London, organised by the English impresario Sir Augustus Harris (Franklin, p 607).

Holst was stunned, partly by the scale of the drama, but principally by the passionate expression of the music, which amazed him by its technical audacity. The young country organist returned to Cheltenham dazed and confused, his musical values having been seriously shaken by this overwhelming experience.

Short, 1990, p 17

Much of Holst’s early output shows the marked influence of Wagner, even if in many cases it was in the clumsy manner of a student trying out a new style that has caught his imagination. Holst owed much of his early Wagnerian thinking to Stanford who was his teacher of composition at the Royal College of Music, and, as will be seen later, the Wagnerian effect was apparent in numerous works of Holst the student. More detailed discussion of this period appears in the following chapters, but suffice it to say here that the pinnacle of Holst’s Wagnerian period (if one can call it such) came with \textit{The Mystic Trumpeter} op 18, a scena for soprano and orchestra composed in 1904 which is a setting of Walt Whitman’s poem ‘From Noon to Starry Night’ from \textit{Leaves of Grass}; by this time he was already suffering the inner turmoil that would lead to his break with the musical language of this time.\(^\text{11}\) With regard to the large choral works \textit{The Mystic Trumpeter} was not a prototype for Holst’s future.

\(^{10}\) Holst may have been powerfully affected by the sound of Wagner, but it will be recalled that 1892 was the year his first opera was composed, an opera firmly under the influence of the Gilbert and Sullivan model.

\(^{11}\) By 1904 Holst was also in the midst of composing \textit{Sita}, his only large-scale 3 act opera, and was experiencing the same disillusionment and frustration with this work.
compositions. Unlike Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* the Teutonic influence in Holst's music would not be in evidence much longer; in fact there are characteristics in *The Mystic Trumpeter* which already pointed the way toward the mature Holstian sound. However, at this stage he was still very much enamoured by large orchestral forces, the somewhat grandiloquent statements by the brass which took the form of musical fragments that he used frequently throughout the piece (1.2 and 1.3), and the heroic use of the voice at climactic moments (1.4). There are recurrent opportunities for the strings to display sweeping motion (1.5) as well as the use of themes that move along insistently with the purpose of either increasing or dissipating pent-up energy (1.6). In fact, the entire work could be seen as an "operatic" masterpiece due to the very dramatic interpretation of the subtleties of the text. *Even Indra*, Holst's first Sanskrit-inspired work from the previous year, demonstrates the same approach, although here the source of the drama is not in a text but in a purely musical impulse derived from the idea of a mythological being (refer to 2.1).

The fervour surrounding Wagner was the state of the artistic world in which Holst found himself as a teenager attempting his earliest compositions. At this earlier stage, however, he was curiously unaffected by all the passionate arguments for and against Wagner; his hero was Arthur Sullivan (Holst, I., 1986, p 1), and the stylistic language of Holst's early operas attest to that. Holst even had a dislike of Wagner; but there is an interesting connection between Holst and Wagner even at this stage in the light of the fact that Sullivan held a certain admiration for Wagner.

Arthur Sullivan attended Wagnerian opera at Covent Garden and observed that *Die Meistersinger* was the greatest comic opera ever written. Hubert Parry studied with Edward Dannreuther and, like Dannreuther, acknowledged Wagner as his hero. Villiers Stanford utilized the principle of leitmotives [sic] in operas written in his youth, and he owed much to Wagner in his later orchestration as
well. Alexander Mackenzie, sent to Germany at the age of ten to study music, absorbed many Wagnerian ideas. Among the greater British composers, Wagner inspired the early work of Elgar and Holst. Elgar displayed his enthusiasm for the Wagnerian leitmotiv in *The Dream of Gerontius*. Gustav Holst deeply admired Wagner, and Wagner influenced the texture of his harmonic thinking, particularly in *The Mystic Trumpeter*.

Sessa, 1979, p 144

Sullivan apparently focussed on Wagner’s more light-hearted side, and ‘light-hearted’ is quite an accurate description of Holst’s stage works during his youthful period. *Meistersinger* as well as the works of Gilbert and Sullivan may easily have touched the nerve of Holst who was, at the time, the creator of light operetta with comic and magical plots. It was only through exposure to the wider world of music and through the influence of Stanford and fellow students at the Royal College of Music that he discovered the significance that Wagner’s music held for him. But even though Holst discovered his innate feeling for operatic writing—initially through exposure to the language of Gilbert and Sullivan and later from Charles Stanford—it would be almost inconceivable that a young composer interested in opera at this time would not eventually be influenced in some way by the legacy of Wagner. Holst’s early operas are a fascinating testament to the changes of style in his writing at the turn of the century; they run the gamut from Sullivanesque to his own brand of Wagnerian chromaticism in which “numbers” operas disappear and in their stead, we see the flow of endless melody that supports his libretti. The sound of Holst in 1892 would be very different from that of the maturing young opera composer of 1902.
2. A Mosaic of Influences
Beyond Bayreuth: Sharp, Weelkes and the Mahābhārata

By the time Holst’s Royal College years had ended, he had been through the stage of imitating Arthur Sullivan, being obsessed with Wagner, and surviving Stanford’s rigorous training in composition. He left his student days having grown out of the Sullivanesque style (an issue that will be examined in Chapter 3 with regard to Holst’s first opera); however, Wagner remained with him for another few years until his frustration with the lack of his own musical identity drove him to reject it. It was this lack of individuality that caused the dissatisfaction and, paradoxically, the musical fertility of the next few years. Several major forces came together in the early years of the twentieth century that had profound impact on Holst’s compositional approach and would eventually free him from the tyranny of chromaticism (for that is how he came to see it) and of inflexible metres. These important elements that allowed a new and unique musical personality to emerge included Holst’s discovery of Sanskrit literature and Hindu epic poetry, the influence of the folk song revival of the early years of the century, and, somewhat later, a renewed interest in madrigals and the composers of the English Renaissance. With regard to the Sanskrit influence the focus of his inspiration was the stories depicted in the epic poetry; he had no intention of creating original works that imitated Indian music. Throughout what may be termed the “Sanskrit period” Holst always reacted to the stories in a musically personal style, even though that style was changing. It was the modal structure of folk song and the metrical freedom inspired by the madrigal that challenged his approach to his
musical texture. Folk song and Tudor\(^1\) music were fast becoming part of the overall English musical culture of the time, and Holst implemented aspects of folk song and madrigal almost instinctively (as has been well documented). After discovering these genres for himself, he was very pleased to find that they had already been an intuitive part of his personality.

1. Sanskrit literature.

While on tour with the Carl Rosa Opera Company in 1899 Holst was lent one volume of Friedrich Max Müller’s *The Sacred Books of the East*, which introduced Holst to the world of Hindu mythology and Sanskrit literature. His interest was such that he was prompted to find out more on this subject that had immediately captured his imagination. His initial idea had been to study Sanskrit literature for the sake of relaxation as well as a source of intellectual stimulus, but it soon became clear that it was more serious an issue. He found himself searching out more books, the most important of which was most likely R. W. Frazer’s *Silent Gods and Sun Steeped Lands*. Holst was fascinated by the philosophical writings, the epic poetry and Hindu mythology. The mythology and poetry fuelled his imagination with their magnificent stories, while he found an affinity with the precepts laid out in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which agreed with his own philosophy of life and the way it should be lived.

The wise man, according to the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, is fearless, and free from vanity, egoism, impatience, and the dread of failure. He is indifferent to worldly ambition: he is just, pure, impartial, and ready to do whatever work is given him, without complaint and without hope of reward. He never finds fault with others, he is not jealous, and he is unmoved by good or evil fortune. He is the same in

\(^1\) Throughout this chapter the term “Tudor” will be used to indicate that fertile musical period in England during the last years of the reign of Elizabeth I, i.e., roughly around the year 1600 during which the art of the madrigal was cultivated intensely, led by Thomas Morley and brought to its zenith by Weelkes and Wilbye.
friendship as in hatred, and in pleasure and in pain. He cares nothing for property, and he has no particular home. Praise and blame are alike to him, and he never speaks unnecessarily. And he has reached understanding by long study and contemplation.

Holst, 1., 1938, p 21

Holst’s search for other Indian literature led him to the translations by Ralph Griffith, a Sanskrit scholar at Oxford University during the 1840s. Griffith published several volumes of translations of Sanskrit poetry. In his articles on Holst and India, Raymond Head implies that Holst owned a copy of these volumes, and the material used in the Sanskrit works was derived entirely from Griffith’s books.

Holst soon realised that, to his mind, the English translations were stilted and unnatural. At first he combined different versions, picking and choosing portions that he preferred, but it became clear that this approach was not going to work. Holst then made the unorthodox decision to learn Sanskrit for the purpose of translating the texts himself. For someone who, by his own admission, had no talent for European languages, this was a bold undertaking; nevertheless he began studies at the School of Oriental Languages at the London Institution.

Holst never learned Sanskrit with anything approaching facility, but developed a system whereby he translated hymns word for word with the use of a dictionary, and each sentence then had to be compared with a crib. It was painstaking work that the composer felt was worth his while since it provided him with simpler and more direct translations that reached the heart of the texts. In this manner Holst translated approximately thirty hymns from the Ramayana, the Rig Veda and the Mahābhārata, as well as the Meghaduta (‘Cloud Messenger’) of the poet Kalidasa. These were
eventually set as solo songs, part-songs, choral works with orchestra, and two operas. 
The *Ramayana* and the *Mahābhārata* provided material for the libretti of *Sīta* and
*Sāvitri*, respectively; both operas will be discussed at length in later chapters.

His first work inspired by Sanskrit literature did not involve a text: *Indra* of 1903 was
a symphonic poem depicting the Hindu god of rain and storm, taken from the *Rig Veda Sanhit*. *Indra* is a fine example of Holst’s style of harmony during the early
years of the century, and the ferocity and drama of Indra and the dragon Vritra
cighting for control of the rain clouds is appropriate material for this miniature
Wagnerian symphonic drama (2.1).

Holst’s first attempt at setting his translated Sanskrit text to music was the song
*Invocation to the Dawn* (1902) for baritone and piano. Imogen Holst describes the
words of the piece as “[limping] unhappily in their three-four harness” and “the piano
accompaniment...might be a Chopin prelude with the tune left out” (Holst, I. 1986, p 9) (2.2). This song bears an uncanny resemblance to “Ushas” from the *Vedic Hymns*, a song cycle of 1907 that played a pivotal role in Holst’s evolution as an
opera composer; *Invocation* was obviously the model for the later song in terms of its
text and its musical construction.²

The interest in translating Sanskrit and the use of these texts to set to music would one
day cease only to be replaced with different issues; however, it shows a facet of
Holst’s personality with regard to non-musical sources of inspiration. In a letter to a

² See chapter five for a fuller discussion of the *Vedic Hymns* and the derivation of Holst’s musical ideas.
friend written circa 1913 he stated that “I only study things that suggest music to me” and spoke of his interest in astrology and the consequent notion that planets were fruitful subject matter for musical expression: “That’s why I worried at Sanskrit...” (quoted in Holst, I., 1938, p 43).

It became evident that something was lacking in Holst’s understanding of what he wanted to achieve in these earlier undertakings: his approach was unsatisfactory and his frustration with his own sound began. Sanskrit text proved to be an extraordinary source of inspiration (and continued to be so for nearly a decade), but it was of no help when dealing with the organization of the actual musical materials. Works of this time still show a fixation for complex chromaticism reminiscent of the late nineteenth century.

2. Folk song.

It was in the early years of the twentieth century that another major force came into play which provided some clarification for the frustrated young composer regarding the way forward to finding his own idiom. During these years a revival of English folk song had been developing and Holst became aware of this movement around 1905. He had never before been interested in folk music, having been brought up with the erroneous notion that folk music was in some way an inferior art form. He came to admire the work of Cecil Sharp, who had spearheaded the movement known as the “First English Folk Song Revival” after joining the English Folk Song Society

---

3 Although a major figure, Sharp was not founder of the school of thought surrounding folk music; English composers were aware of, and making use of, folk music in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Hubert Parry gave the inaugural address at the opening of the Folk Song Society in 1898 (Dibble, p 36) and did much to encourage the movement as did Stanford, whose work as editor and arranger of folk music was well known before the Society even came into being.
In total, Sharp collected over five thousand folk songs from all over the country, as well as some American songs of English origin (Mitchell, p 50). Thanks to his efforts—as well as those of Lucy Broadwood, G.B. Gardiner, Percy Grainger and Vaughan Williams—English folk song was rescued from potential oblivion, just as folk music was preserved in central Europe due to the tireless dedication of Bartók and Kodály.

Even though Holst did not collect songs himself (as did Vaughan Williams, who began in 1903) he certainly found immediate inspiration to use them by exploring their modal melodic construction. "He had already begun to dream of the possibility of a renaissance in English music, and here, to his delight, he found English music at its very best. The tunes had the simplicity and economy that he felt to be essential in any great art" (Holst, I., 1938, p 27). Adopting the simple and direct characteristics of folk music became one of the avenues Holst took in due course in order to free himself from the tyrannical chromaticism and heavy orchestration to which he had succumbed during his later student years. "He was content to steep himself in the beauty of the songs until he had made that beauty a part of his own life. It was not easy to shake off the old way of thinking and feeling. By an effort of the will he managed to persuade his nineteenth-century harmonies to shed layer after layer of protective chromaticism until they were left standing on the chill and unfamiliar brink.

---

of a Phrygian austerity" (Holst, 1. 1986, p 12). This is illustrated well by examples from a volume of Hampshire folk songs collected by Henry Balfour Gardiner for which Holst was invited to provide piano accompaniments. The astonishingly simple piano parts underscore the beauty of the melodies through the use of very basic harmonic support, atmospheric effects, and touches of humour. In every case the vocal parts and the essence of the lyrics take precedence (2.3a, b and c).

There are, however, similarities and differences in the way Holst envisioned the use of the folk song compared with his contemporaries. Both he and his closest colleague Vaughan Williams found them to be a revelation, but they were not to be the basis for a mature style. Vaughan Williams acknowledged the folk song to be “his most significant influence” (Foreman, p 4), but eventually felt that they were not “capable of sustaining full-scale composition” (Payne, E., p 103). They were a “point of departure”, a fact true for all the great figures of the new music of the in the first decades of the new century” (Foreman, p 19). He, like Holst, assimilated harmonic and melodic modality and both would use actual folk material in some of their larger forms (for example, Vaughan Williams’s *Norfolk Rhapsodies* and Holst’s *A Somerset Rhapsody*) as well as the imitation of the folk style. However, whereas Vaughan Williams’s main compositional issues could be traced back to Stanford—folk song, Tudor revival, symphonic traditions, and the aspiration for a national opera (Dibble, p 37)—Holst, while sharing the enthusiasm for Tudor music as well as folk, was more concerned with the use of any stimulus as long as it suited his purpose. When the inspiration of folk song was spent (in those early years) he had by then found other sources of stimulation (Sanskrit classical writing continued to be a major force; his astrological hobby was on the horizon) and these would encourage new works in
individual rather than traditional forms. Vaughan Williams was disenchanted with the stagnation of the British musical scene at the turn of the century and found deliverance in the native music (an almost political point of view); Holst, at the time, was entangled in the Teutonic musical language, and found folk song with its melodic/harmonic appeal as the means forward.

As mentioned above, Holst’s masterpiece of this era that makes very effective use of folk song is *A Somerset Rhapsody* (1906; revised 1907). Obviously, it was not his first experiment with using folk tunes in original settings; moreover, 1907 was a pivotal time for Holst’s reappraisal of his own style, and the work’s orchestration is radically different from that of *Indra* of 1903. Gone are the heavy textures and chromatic harmonies. Holst allowed the songs to guide his hand, and he responded by staying true to the modal framework that they provided.\(^5\) Holst chose three Somerset songs as the basis for the *Rhapsody*: “It’s a Rosebud in June” which opens the work (2.4a; compare it with the opening of the *Rhapsody* in 2.4b)\(^6\), “High Germany” (two versions: 2.5a and 2.5c; its use in the *Rhapsody*, 2.5b and 2.5d), and “The True Lover’s Farewell” (2.6a and 2.6b). All are introduced separately, explored with different instrumental timbres, and even combined: “High Germany” (first version) with “True Lover’s Farewell” at rehearsal 8, and “High Germany” (second version) with “It’s a Rosebud in June” just after rehearsal 14. Holst later used this technique in the finale of the *St. Paul’s Suite* (1912-13) when combining “The Dargason” with “Greensleeves”.

\(^5\) 1907 was the year of the *Vedic Hymns*, which proved to be the link between his two Sanskrit operas, the second of which was in drastic contrast to the first in its modal writing and minimal orchestration. It can be speculated that the *Rhapsody* had, in its way, a certain influence on his overall writing.

\(^6\) This song was identified as “The Sheep-Shearing Song” in the Boosey & Hawkes edition of 1927.
Holst was not a prolific composer for the piano, but he found it an ideal medium for the setting of folk tunes. There are several pieces based on traditional songs for which he preferred to use the theme and variations form, such as *Two Folk Song Fragments* ("O! I Hae Seen the Roses Blaw" and "The Shoemakker" 2.7a and b).

The spirit of folk song became "a part of his own life", as Imogen Holst observed. Many other works from that period and indeed much later still displayed the characteristic rhythms and inherent feel of English folk song. The first movement of *St. Paul's Suite* is an example of folk song style with its unmistakably Dorian feel. It comes from the composer's newly found sense of the idiom without recourse to a pre-existing tune (2.8).

Even as late as 1932 Holst composed a piece in response to his daughter's request for a piano work that did not contain any folk tunes. This was the Jig from *Two Pieces for Piano*, and even though there are no references to authentic songs the work displays its creator's feel for the manner, again with its use of the Dorian mode, but based on B (2.9).

The unlikely Wagner/Sullivan pairing of styles that had so heavily permeated his writing at the turn of the century had now either been joined by or, upon occasion, superseded by, an even more unlikely pairing of influences: Sanskrit and the English folk song (Mitchell, p 51). This pairing of the Sanskrit influence with modal harmony appeared in 1907 in the aforementioned *Vedic Hymns*. 
Some writers claim that it was exclusively the influence of folk songs that “banished all traces of Wagner” from his work (e.g. see Holst, I. 1938, p 28; also Dickinson 1995, p 165) although this may be somewhat too simplistic and requires a more circumspect, broad-minded examination. It is certain that Holst was exposed to and became saturated in modal harmonies; he could sense the inherent fusion of words and music in the songs, their spontaneous freedom of rhythm, and he admired their emotional beauty combined with impersonal restraint (Holst, I. 1938, p 28).

Despite several good works that were produced during this period Holst knew that setting folk songs was bound to end. Much later (around 1930) Holst had said regarding setting these songs, “it is a limited form of art and when one works for long in a small form, mannerisms are almost inevitable” (Holst, G. quoted in Holst, I. 1938, p 146; also see Holst, I. 1986, p 138). Nevertheless, as late as 1931 he completed a cycle of twelve Welsh folk songs in English translation.

Now that Holst had discovered an antidote to the heavy chromaticism mainly through the simple modality of the folk song, his settings of the Sanskrit texts took on this style. He had, however, begun the three-act opera Sita in 1899 or 1900 and continued to work on it approximately in the manner in which it was begun until its completion in 1906; it still carried the weight of Wagnerian sound even though the other influences discussed (as well as his own maturation process) left their mark in the later acts. The simultaneous work on folk song settings was having its effect, and newer compositions showed a sense of simplicity and direct expression hitherto unknown in his writing. His growing dissatisfaction with Sita was due to the heavy-handed manner in which the material was treated; new works using Sanskrit texts
followed that showed Holst using an entirely new approach, one he had learned from the songs of his own country. Even though the cultures are worlds apart the depth of his Sanskrit translations was expressed more readily when the direct and simple expressiveness learned from folk song was applied to them.

3. Tudor Music

While the major emphasis of this study will deal with the culmination of the Sanskrit period and the point at which Holst reached maturity as a composer it is worth shedding some light on the final major force that exerted itself somewhat later on his music, that of the English Madrigal School. Approximately one decade after his personal discovery of folk song, Holst came across an important new source in his search for the “musical idiom of the English language”. Edmund H. Fellowes’ edition of Thomas Morley’s madrigals was published in 1913, after which Holst was able to assert that “I think I can say that since this event I have never been quite the same man” (cited in Short, 1990, p 115). Owing to Cecil Sharp in the field of English folk song and Fellowes and the new editions of English madrigals, Holst felt that England finally had an opportunity of learning her own music. “Weelkes was his favourite of all the Tudor composers, and [Holst] considered him to be ‘the real musical embodiment of the English character in his fantastic unexpectedness’ ” (Holst, I. 1938, p 44).

In an article written by Holst in 1926 entitled “My Favourite Tudor Composer” (reprinted in Vaughan Williams, U. and Holst, I. eds., 1959, pp 52-55) he extolled Weelkes’s originality, praising, in particular, *O care, thou wilt despatch me* (1600) for its fresh, chromatic harmony (2.10). He also made mention of *To shorten winter’s sadness* (1598) as a perfect example of a short ballet. The “objective values of
"proportion and harmony" (Short 1990, p 115) that Holst discovered in the volumes of madrigals were a welcome change from the ultra-Romanticism of the previous years. In these works Holst found that the music was rhythmically pliable enough to adapt itself to the text through irregular and changing metres. Weelkes demonstrated fluidity of line in his madrigals with their changing metres as in *On the plains fairy trains* of 1598 (2.11). Holst felt a kind of gratification in that he had already used the technique of changing metres when setting texts even before his acquaintance with Tudor music, such as in the *Ave Maria* of 1900.\(^7\)

The characteristics of the English madrigal were not so much a new stylistic influence that Holst found congenial and then adopted into his own work (as in the case of modal construction of the folk song); with Elizabethan music it was more an issue of reinforcement—a kind of moral support for what he had already used in some of his compositions, particularly with respect to flexible rhythms and changing metres.

Folk song and, later, Elizabethan madrigals brought Holst into direct contact with his native music and taught him that words need not be confined to one particular metre. Music and words in his songs had to grow up together (to use his own description) as they do in folk song, and as the Elizabethans fashioned their vocal music. Holst was fond of the technique of hemiola and, like irregular metres, used it in early pieces long before he became acquainted with Fellowes’ editions. He responded musically to the needs of the text and in this he shared an important characteristic with folk song and Tudor music. Michael Short has postulated that the idea of alternating metres, cross-

---

\(^7\) The manuscript of this work is lost, and the quotation found of the opening theme is insufficient to provide an example of changing metre. The published version of the piece has not yet been located.
rhythms and other such complexities in *The Planets* may have been inspired by his study of Fellowes' editions (Short 1990, p 360). The connection can be extended to such complexities in other works as well. He used these devices in vocal and choral works in reaction to the requirements of the text as did his Elizabethan counterparts.

New sources of musical and non-musical inspiration followed throughout his compositional career, and the Holstian sound was enriched accordingly; the Holst of the late twenties and early thirties was a different matter compared with the young trombone player and inexperienced music schoolteacher of the early years of the century. The above-mentioned "objective values of proportion and harmony" were firmly established now and Holst's directness of expression was allowed to come forth, particularly after 1906. The "banishment" of Wagner was made more feasible by what he gleaned from Tudor music as well as folk song; it was not simply a matter of the replacement of tonality/chromaticism with modality. A unique idiom was emerging, and it was due to the reconciliation of the disparate elements referred to in this chapter. Folk song and Elizabethan madrigal put Holst in touch with his rich musical heritage and from these he drew a wealth of organisational ideas. Sanskrit text opened his mind to the possibilities inherent in unusual sources, particularly one which nourished his imagination for approximately a decade. Outside influences are inevitable and positive, and work favourably for an artist with the sensitivity of Holst who could combine what seemed to be incongruent elements and create fusion in his own inimitable way.

Even though the overpowering influence of Sullivan was finally eclipsed during Holst's student years at the Royal College, he retained the feel for melodic design that
he had learned from his early idol. By the time Holst left the College he had experienced and incorporated all of the above interests and influences, but with regard to his first opera it was another matter. The year 1892 found Holst a very young man with little formal training in composition working on *Lansdown Castle, or the Sorcerer of Tewkesbury*, and armed only with the understanding of opera in the language of the time.
3. The Student Years: Operatic Juvenilia

Gustav Holst descended from a line of musicians on his father’s side; there were at least four generations of professional musicians including Gustav himself. His great-grandfather Matthias Holst, born in Riga, was a composer as well as keyboard and harp teacher to the Imperial Russian Court. He married and moved to England, where he established himself as a teacher and a composer of light opera. Of the two sons the elder, Gustavus Valentin (Holst’s grandfather) was also a composer and music teacher. Of his five children, two became professional musicians; the fourth child, Adolph, an accomplished pianist, chamber musician, conductor, concert organiser and organist, was Gustav’s father. It is not surprising, therefore, that Adolph had high hopes for his son’s musical development, and during Gustav’s early years he studied the piano. His father’s intention was that his son would become a professional concert pianist.

The fate that befell the idea of a career as a pianist due to the neuritis in his right arm and the circumstances surrounding Holst’s learning the trombone initially as a possible treatment for his asthma is well documented in other sources, and will not be repeated here. Nevertheless, Holst certainly inherited the instincts of a composer, much to his father’s consternation. In the early days, the sound world of Mendelssohn, Grieg and Sullivan held sway over the young composer but, as far as the technique of composition was concerned, he had yet to learn the rudiments of harmony and counterpoint. Undeterred, around 1887 Holst set a poem from Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* that he had been given to study in school; he was particularly taken
with the story of Horatius and proceeded to set the poem as a cantata.\footnote{Refer back to example 1.1.} He worked on his own, away from the gaze of his father, with nothing but Berlioz's *Treatise on Instrumentation* for guidance. The work was orchestrated for S/CA/T/B, strings, flutes, 2 clarionets [sic] in C, 2 trumpets in C, 2 tenor trombones, bassoon, bombardon, side and big drums, cymbals and triangle.\footnote{The spelling of instruments and the order presented are Holst's own.} The unfinished work was abandoned (Holst, I. 1986, p 2). Years later Holst wrote a somewhat apologetic note for posterity at the top of the first page\footnote{"This was written before I knew any harmony or counterpoint—probably in 1887. The only book on the theory of music that I knew was Berlioz's *Instrumentation* which I knew practically by heart. I wrote this (the words being part of my homework while at the Cheltenham Grammar School) in secret bit by bit until one day—the family being out—I tried to play it on the piano. The result on my nerves was that I never wrote another note of it."}, and in August, 1917 Holst wrote about it to his friend W.G. Whittaker:

> I've unearthed 'Horatius' for your benefit (?). I'd rather you didn't show it to too many people. I may have been more than twelve when I wrote it. In fact I believe I was nearly thirteen!

> It was the result of knowing Berlioz' 'Instrumentation' not wisely but too well and not knowing anything else about theory of music. I don't think I ever learnt anything about a common chord although of course I knew the sound of one well enough.

> I wrote it at odd moments in my bedroom etc until one sad day I took it to the piano and tried to play. I never wrote another note. Previously to that I had had it ringing in my head when walking...but somehow what I played wasn't what I had heard in my imagination.

As quoted in Short, ed. 1974, pp 29-30

Even though the sound was not at all what he had expected his determination was such that the experience did not discourage him from further compositional experiments. The reduced-score example given in 1.1 shows that, despite the awkward chord progressions and doublings, dissonant clashes, etc, the young Holst
had an instinctive feel for the colouring of a melodic line through the use of chromatic motion, as well as something of an understanding of modulation.

During the years following the ill-fated *Horatius* Holst tried his hand at a number of small-scale works, many of which were vocal, usually with piano accompaniment. While these pieces are not of particular importance in terms of his later output, they are significant in establishing his lifelong love of literature and poetry (such as that of Tennyson, Goethe, Thomas Campbell and Charles Kingsley to name but a few) and his instinct for the vocal medium. His position as organist and choirmaster at village churches most likely accounts for the composition of his early organ voluntaries as well as choral works accompanied by organ. There was obviously a drive within the young composer to create, despite the fact that he still lacked formal training in theory and composition. It is unfortunate that he tended to dismiss his early works, which, although not necessarily masterpieces, deserve attention for the sake of providing insight into the composer's musical development.

The seven early operas of Holst fall within the span of a decade and, with the exception of *Lansdown Castle* and *The Youth's Choice*, were composed during his time at the Royal College of Music. Holst's first venture into the medium of opera came in 1892, the year before he began studies at the Royal College and after four months spent in Oxford studying counterpoint. *Lansdown Castle or the Sorcerer of Tewkesbury* was the setting of a libretto by one Major A.C. Cunningham, a resident of Cheltenham. Holst's early fascination with sorcerers, magic and mysticism was already evident in this first operetta, and it would not be the last time he would turn to

---

4 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 1.
them as the basis for the subject of a stage work. The attitude to Holst’s early endeavours by writers contemporary and more recent is embodied by Paul Holmes: “Its rather silly plot, involving sorcerers and magic mirrors, is unworthy of description as it was written largely as a joke by a local army officer known to the family” (Holmes 1997, p 11). This is personal opinion presented as factual information and care should be taken in accepting it without question. Lansdown Castle was meant as a comic opera; therefore it is no surprise that the plot is “silly” and “was written largely as a joke”. Michael Short also felt that a “full description of the plot would be tedious and pointless” and that “Holst clearly regarded the libretto as simply an excuse for music rather than as a dramatic entity in its own right” (Short, 1990, p 18). Whether this is true or not the plot is worth looking into for the sake of the element of sorcery in order to see how he treated it musically in these early days, and to compare it with later works.

Lansdown Castle was first performed in its entirety on 7 February 1893 at the Cheltenham Corn Exchange. While the libretto was not considered by the press to be of much interest or sophistication, the reaction to the music was very favourable.

The remarkable musical treatment of Major Cunningham’s libretto more than justified the production of the operetta, and Mr. Gustav von Holst gives evidence in his work not only of genius, but of careful laborious study.

Gloucester Echo, 9 Feb 1893

The complete vocal score (which is available only in manuscript) displays somewhat naïve, simplistic harmony, and Holst was clearly thinking in a rather jocular vein in his attempt to reflect the mood of Cunningham’s libretto. The Wagnerian concept of

---

^ As a possible point of interest, while writing the synopsis for this opera the present writer did not come across any reference to mirrors.
endless melody had not yet caught his imagination; *Lansdown Castle* is quite clearly a
“numbers” opera with some self-contained arias. In his youthful enthusiasm, he
allocated short breaks between numbers with “pause for applause, then—” self-
confidently written into the score. There are many changes in pencil to the tempo
markings as well as some alterations to the libretto. Characters with such names as
Lord Rigmarole, Lady Rigmaree and a wizard called Hocus Pocus are
reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan (this is not unimportant, since Sullivan was still Holst’s musical
hero at this time). As stated earlier, there is an element of social commentary that is
featured in the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, but Holst was more concerned with
the ideas of sorcery and magic, an interest that began at this early time and remained
with him throughout most of his career.

Many Sullivanesque aspects show themselves (such as those described in Jacobs’s
descriptions quoted in Chapter 2). The orchestral forces meant for *Lansdown Castle*
are not known since only the vocal score is extant. However, there existed in Imogen
Holst’s private collection the full autograph manuscript of the *Country Dance* (Act
II), which was scored for flute, clarinet, cornet and strings. This may give a clue as to
the instrumentation Holst might have had in mind for part, if not all, of the work,
suggesting that the ensemble was more on the scale of a chamber group.

At this stage Holst excelled in individual, short numbers, as did Sullivan; this operetta
is a collection of songs, duets, trios, quartets the beginnings and endings of which are
clearly defined. Recitative is used sparingly in its traditional role as a clarification of
the action. Holst was naturally also taken with the idea of “patter” singing; the finest
example of it in this operetta is undoubtedly a number with a short introduction
sporting a clearly defined cadence and minimal accompaniment, known as the “Nagging Trio” (3.1).

True to the Rossinian (i.e. Gilbert and Sullivan) model Holst’s characters reach their climactic moment at the end of the first act with the dramatic “Revenge we cry with flashing eye!” and it is at this point in the story that the services of the wizard are engaged.

At this early stage, his depiction of sorcery does not display any of the serious sophistication that it received in later works; here Holst relies on a fragment of rhythm as a building block for the wizard’s opening song at the beginning of Act II. Despite development in the musical line that one might expect the theme remains rather static, as does its formulaic accompaniment (3.2). Holst’s portrayal here of sorcery is particularly tongue-in-cheek (which is in keeping with the story), the potion “recipe” being something of a parody of the witches’ brew from Macbeth.

Holst, already showing signs of imaginative musical creativity, appalled his Cheltenham audience with a portion of an Anglican chant used as the wizard’s magic incantation, directing the choir to hum through closed lips in unaccompanied consecutive perfect fifths (3.3).

---

6 A search through sources of Anglican music has not yet revealed the identity of the original chant used.

7 It may be of interest to point out that in Michael Short’s excellent source on Holst and his music there is an error regarding this point: “Holst harmonized a plainchant phrase in parallel fourths as a magic incantation” (p 401). The interval named is incorrect.
The libretto with which Holst had to work left little doubt that the Gilbert and Sullivan style was best suited, and his own enthusiasm for their operettas may explain his eagerness to work with Cunningham's libretto, the beginning of which runs thus:

If happy you would be in married life
Be careful then to see ere you be wife
    that your fiancé’s tastes with yours agree
Or quickly you will find
you’re not of equal mind
Tho’ still the law will bind
    and keep you tight much as you would like to be free
Be sure to ascertain if he likes air
Or draughts will be a bane, and constant care
    will be required if he is not to sneeze
Then smoking too I vow
will lead to many a row
If you will not allow his horrid pipe because it makes you wheeze.

Holst entered Charles Villiers Stanford’s composition class at the Royal College and became one of a generation of English composers who experienced the great teacher’s idiosyncratic manner. Stanford had a rather good opinion of Holst and described him as “enthusiastic and happily not devoid of humour” (Holst, I., 1938, p 13). By all accounts Stanford had his own unique ways by which he extracted the individual qualities from his students. In his diary he explained his philosophy of teaching composition.

Young composers were taught abroad upon paper, and only the most picked and finished examples of their work ever reached the point of hearing. We went on the principle that a hearing of a composition is the best lesson the writer can get, and that the perspiration and agony from which a composer suffers when he hears the sounds of his own inexperience is the most valuable part of his training.

Stanford, 1914, p 219

Holst readily made friends with fellow students; one student in particular, Fritz Hart, became a close companion and colleague, and collaborated with Holst in a number of
operettas composed during their years at the College. Their first opportunity to join forces came by way of Holst’s aunt, Anna Newman, who ran St. Mary’s School in Barnes. In 1894 she asked him to write something for her students to perform and he responded with great zeal; Gustav then persuaded Fritz to write a libretto and together they created *Ianthe*, a romantic operetta for children. The idea for the libretto was supplied by Mrs. Newman herself. Except for the fully orchestrated *Ländler* and *Storm Dance*, which are in private hands, the manuscript does not survive. Imogen Holst notes that the play’s characters were listed as “Mortals and Immortals”, and the Grand Finale consisted of *Valse, Titania’s Solo, Gavotte, Ianthe’s Solo, Second Valse, Minuet,* and *Madrigal: Song of the Bells* (Holst, I. 1974, p 226). The first and only performance was probably given the following year by the students of St. Mary’s directed from the piano by Holst himself. In 1943 Hart recalled this work and commented on Holst’s sound at the time, describing it as “something between “The night-wind howls” from *Ruddigore* and the opening music of the *Walküre*, but with quite a dash of himself, I must admit. The stormy accompaniment—was there not something of the *Erl King* in it?—” (Hart, 1943, vol. 39, no. 2, p 45).

In 1895 Stanford suggested that Hart write a libretto based on *Beau Brummel* for Holst to set to music. This is not surprising considering Stanford’s own enthusiasm for opera, his own achievements in the field, and his untiring efforts to establish a national opera. Stanford may have well have fanned the flame of Holst’s own predilection for opera. *The Revoke* of 1895 was the result of this collaboration and, although it was never performed in public, but only played in rehearsal by a group of fellow students under Stanford’s supervision, Holst felt that it deserved to be denoted
as 'Opus 1'. He entered the work in a notebook in which he intended to record the titles of all his compositions as they were completed. The characters, besides Beau Brummel (baritone), are Sir Henry Playfair (bass), Lady Playfair (contralto), Emily (soprano) and Richard Carlton (tenor). The core of the drama is the playing of whist, both as the cause of the strife and the instrument of its resolution.

The designation of this opera as his first opus suggests that Holst felt that he had achieved something new and different, and had developed his style in some major way. The size of his orchestra had certainly increased: the manuscript of the full score shows the instrumentation as flutes, oboes, clarinets in B-flat, bassoon, horn in F, trumpet in F, timpani, and strings (albeit without the double bass). It may simply indicate that he had a larger orchestra at his disposal being at the College; however, he still felt secure enough to compose for a larger ensemble. Hart's libretto may have had a beneficial effect on Holst's creativity; simply put, the story line for The Revoke, Gilbert and Sullivan in character though it is, is still quite an improvement on Cunningham's sorcerer from Tewkesbury. The plot is rather simple and straightforward, but the stage directions elucidate the action in a way that those for Lansdown Castle did not.

Holst's satisfaction with his opus 1 almost certainly came from his musical setting; only three years separated Lansdown Castle from The Revoke, but the musical fabric of opus 1 was dramatically different. Formal training in composition along with Hart’s advocacy of Wagner must have contributed to Holst’s new sound in 1895. Generally speaking, his whole approach was affected: The Revoke has a more

---

8 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 2.
traditional overture while *Lansdown Castle* begins with a mere four bars that introduce the first song. In the latter work the voices are meant to carry the musical line while being supported by a rather static, simplistic accompaniment (see 3.1). In 1895 Holst's rhythms are adventurous and he shows a certain confidence in his orchestral writing by allocating more musically important tasks to his instruments. A very engaging instrumental interlude accompanies the playing of the decisive card game (3.4).

The orchestra has its part to play in contributing to the humour inherent in the work; at one point it helps to prevent one of the singers from disgracing himself by using foul language (3.5). Thus Holst began to feel an inextricable link between the music and the comedy (or drama) depicted by the libretto and he made use of the collaboration of instruments and voices to great effect in the future.

Holst began to think in chromatic lines probably due to his exposure to Wagner's music at this time; chromaticism is rampant from the beginning—witness, for example, the first violin line from the overture (3.6).

Metrical constraints did not imprison Holst's vocal lines in *The Revoke*, which was an indication of the future Holst as a composer for the voice: choral works, songs, hymns and operas. The text was no longer forced to conform to the regular downbeats of a particular metre; rather, the musical lines tended to take on the shape of the text (3.7 and 3.8).
Although glimpses of the mature Holst were beginning to appear he had yet to learn about more integrated thematic construction, for example; there are many missed opportunities in *The Revoke* for establishing themes and motifs that could represent certain characters or suggest particular events, states of mind, etc. Holst’s opus 1, though an achievement in 1895, is unfortunately lacking in this kind of thematic continuity.

Another musical alliance with Fritz Hart came the following year with *The Magic Mirror* of 1896. Holst had developed a strong liking for certain writers such as George MacDonald, and it was a story taken from one of Holst’s favourite books, MacDonald’s *Phantastes: a faerie romance*, which provided the material for the libretto. The opera, however, remained unfinished. Hart had left the College and was on a conducting tour, so work on the opera had to be continued by correspondence. After some critical comments were made by Hart about the music for the opening scenes, Holst simply stopped writing. According to Hart himself, however, (in his reminiscences of Holst and their collaborations) things were not quite so simple. Hart gently implied that Holst had initiated the difficulty: “By this time [Holst] was growing more critical of my literary efforts” (Hart, 1943, p 47). Holst had also apparently given the libretto to other friends to read, all of whom concurred that Hart “had no literary style” (Hart, 1943, p 47).

Hart altered the libretto “until Gustav’s newly awakened literary sense was more or less satisfied with what I submitted to him, and he set to work on the music” (Hart, p 48). Holst copied out and posted to Hart what he had written up to that time so that Hart should see it, and asked for his criticism. “I must have written a peculiarly stupid
letter in reply, for he wrote back saying, "You are quite right—the MM is all Wagner—and I have destroyed it" (Hart, 1943, p 48). Hart continued by claiming that there was doubtless some Wagnerian influence in it, but

There was much that was not only pure Gustav in his music, but also much that was a new Gustav. And my ill-judged and utterly mistaken attempt at criticism had resulted in the destruction of nearly a third of a work which, I am convinced, promised more than ordinarily well.

Hart, 1943, vol. 39, no 2, p 48

Holst’s claim to have destroyed the music is rather odd, considering the fact that, happily, the (incomplete) manuscript is held by the British Library (Add. MS 47807). It is dated ‘Sep 25th/96’ and is a vocal score, all in Holst’s hand, with indications as to his desired orchestration. In total there are eleven pages of music, and a mere thirty-six bars constitute the introduction. Holst still preferred opera on a smaller scale, and *The Magic Mirror* is a good example of such an opera, having only two characters, Cosmo and The Lady in the Mirror.

There are sketches that show several versions of the Introduction and opening scene that accompany the full score. It is interesting to follow the evolution of what eventually became the opening of the work. Holst at first decided upon a strict contrapuntal exercise that included a tonic pedal of five bars’ duration. After several bars it resumes for seven more bars after which the sketches are unclear as to his intention for the bass line (3.9).

---

9 While Holst had claimed that he had "destroyed" presumably all of the work, Hart’s comment about the “destruction of nearly a third” of *Mirror* would account for the existing sketches.
10 It seems that Holst had decided to use the full orchestra, for his (albeit somewhat incomplete) notes indicate woodwind, brass and strings.
11 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 3.
His next idea concerned reserving the above theme for the first scene, but to begin the opera with a passage of richer texture (3.10) that still made use of the pedal point. This he designated the introduction to the first scene. The first scene proper used a variation of the original opening; a change of metre and some addition to the orchestration transformed the character of the first scene, as did the change from *Andante quasi Adagio* to *Moderato ma Agitato* (3.11).

The stage directions are very specific and indicate an instinctive feel for dramatic effect. The curtain rises towards the end of the above passage and, according to the stage directions, “Cosmo [is] discovered reading in the red glow of sunset which gradually deepens. Every now and then his eyes wander from the book to the mirror”. Cosmo’s opening music is in a sombre vein (3.12).

It is important at this point to take note of the specific use of lighting indicated in the stage directions; this red glow which deepens over the course of a scene is an effect that became very important to Holst as a dramatic tool. It was used in *The Youth’s Choice* of 1902 as well as in the Sanskrit operas, but became less important in the late comic operas. However, *The Magic Mirror* is the first operatic work in which he specified the use of the red glow of sunset. At the end of the first “section” the red glow has been replaced by “deep gloom”, a deepening of the light that will be used in *Sita*, as well as in *Sāvitrī* as Death approaches to confront her. Three bars after the deep gloom there appears “a faint white light…in the mirror which gradually increases”. Again the stage directions leave us in no doubt as to what was wanted: “Cosmo, on noticing [the light] watches the mirror with suppressed excitement”. Holst at least reached the point in the libretto when Cosmo’s dearest wish comes true.
as the Lady appears to him again in the mirror at dusk, and the light in the mirror brightens to reveal the woman. This is accompanied by a theme that Holst may possibly have used later in the work had he not abandoned the project (3.13).

There is an unprecedented level of emotion in *The Magic Mirror*, a longing and desperation not attempted in the earlier works. Holst was evolving rapidly as an operatic composer, and his interest in mysticism was now coming to the fore. The Lady who, with Cosmo’s help, disappears from the mirror and then appears in the room tells him of her fate: she is the slave of a magician’s will and is trapped within the mirror, doomed to death. The supernatural element in *The Magic Mirror* is a far cry from the sorcery of *Lansdown Castle*. This is not the tongue-in-cheek, light-hearted story of a wizard who can cast spells—the mood is far more serious and certainly not meant as comedy or as children’s entertainment. Cosmo’s opening lines “Mine eyes are drawn again unto the mirror and spellbound gaze upon its mystic surface. ‘Tis thus all day, for eyes are still the vassals that serve the soul” portend something vaguely tragic from the beginning, and a study of the story on which this opera was based confirms this. George MacDonald published his collection of stories in the mid-nineteenth century and the edition dating from 1894 is quite possibly the one with which Holst may have been acquainted. The story, set in Prague, of Cosmo von Wehrstahl is the thirteenth of MacDonald’s “faerie romances”. The Lady in the Mirror was the Princess von Hohenweiss who...

... gave offence to an old woman who had held an office of trust in the family and who, after some incoherent threats, disappeared. But the strangest part of the story is its association with the loss of an antique mirror, which stood in her dressing-room, and of which she constantly made use.

MacDonald, 2002, p 183

---

12 It was at this point that Holst stopped work on the opera.
The appeal of the story to Holst would have been clear: a princess is held captive in a mirror by some sorcery; only a spell uttered by Cosmo can free her. Once she is freed of the mirror it is discovered that Cosmo's life is now forfeit and he is found fatally wounded in the street.

A look at chapter thirteen of the novel in which this story is found shows that Holst and Hart were not interested in presenting the tale from the beginning. MacDonald's story establishes the character of Cosmo, i.e., the fact that he was a poor student in Prague, what he studied, a description of the room in which he lived, etc. The story also describes how Cosmo came upon the mirror in a back street antiques shop, left it, but became somewhat obsessed with it and returned to purchase it. The appearance of the Lady in the mirror occurs well into the story, and Holst and his librettist omitted a great deal of detail from the beginning. They seemed to be concerned only with the magical occurrence of the figure in the mirror, as well as Cosmo's fanatical desire that she should appear in person before him. This, at any rate, is how they planned the beginning of their opera. Very little of the story was used before work was abandoned; in the novel Cosmo, who is in love with the Lady, awaits her appearance at twilight and, with a book of spells, compels her to appear. All the extensive details of his magic ritual were omitted in the opera; she steps out of the mirror into the room when Cosmo commands her to appear. The opera is faithful to the story inasmuch as the Lady is finally present in the room, asking why he has summoned her. The dialogue used by Hart is mostly his own, although there are similarities in two spots to the original story:
MacDonald: "Why...didst thou bring a poor maiden through the rainy streets alone?"

Hart: "Why hast thou drawn me hither through the crowded streets?"

MacDonald: "Ah, the mirror...Alas! I am but a slave, while that mirror exists."

Hart: "The mirror, ah! Whilst that same mirror doth exist I am the slave of a magician's will."

The magician is not part of the original story; whether it was Hart's idea or Holst's is not possible to say. One can only speculate as to how much more of the story would have been used; it is likely that they were more interested in establishing the characters immediately at the beginning, and then focussing on the ensuing drama and tragic outcome. There are other characters in MacDonald's book, but they may not have held enough dramatic interest to be included in the opera. It is probable that the tragic end—the violent death of Cosmo after he has freed the Lady by smashing the mirror—would have been given full dramatic treatment.

Although left unfinished, the opera shows a marked change in treatment with Holst's use of more chromatic contrapuntal techniques (3.14). The phrases are not symmetrical and the rhythm moves more freely. The music moulds itself to the words; it takes on their rhythmic and syllabic shape, as in example 3.12. It is interesting to consider whether Holst had become aware of the technique of endless melody by this time. Certain rhythmic and melodic figures are introduced in the early bars that would probably have been used as thematic material had he continued with the work. The use of the augmented fourth/diminished fifth interval is prevalent as a method of imbuing his music with emotion, and his thinking regarding texture had become more chordal, including broken chords; much of the music surface is filled out with fuller sounds, particularly in the inner voices. It is not indicated what the
instrumentation would have been; it is possible that it was too early for Holst himself to have decided. The appearance of tritones and vocal lines that mould themselves to the rhythmic and syllabic shape of the words are already evidence of a move away from the Gilbert and Sullivan idiom, and show an admiration for the Wagnerian sound.

Despite the fact that the work was abandoned it has significance in indicating the direction of Holst's dramatic thinking, particularly in the area of tonality. Tonality—both modulation and the "colour" of different keys—would provide interest for him in the more serious early works (that is, those not meant for children's productions), as well as into the Sanskrit operas as the means to underscore the drama or to enhance the atmosphere. Modulations to unrelated keys are achieved by chromatic stepwise motion (3.15), and the change of mode helps to express the mood of the character.

For example, there is an important shift of tonal colour from G major to F minor as Cosmo refers to the "twilight hour". As Cosmo sings of the pause ""twixt night and day" when twilight's hour will bring back the Lady in the mirror there is a sudden change to the major mode that helps to express his joy. When he senses her arrival in the mirror the tonality changes abruptly to C major; he uses another abrupt change of colour, moving to D flat major when the Lady finally appears in the mirror. This new musical plateau of D flat brings with it the directions accel e cresc, again to help emphasise the excitement of the moment. Different keys are exploited at different moments, including a sudden shift to G major—the first time that this key is used—when the Lady materialises in the room and Cosmo first addressed her directly.
The orchestral accompaniment stops at important points of the story and the voice is heard alone at its dramatic apex; Holst often used this approach with respect to dramatic climax and it will be seen many times in the two Sanskrit operas Sīta and Sāvitrī. In total only 267 bars of *The Magic Mirror* were completed; the music breaks off suddenly in the middle of bar 268.

With regard to *The Magic Mirror* two elements of dramatic expression stand out which make it a valuable work to study (regardless of the fact that it is unfinished): Holst’s exploration of changing tonal centres as a means of colouring the expression of the story, and the use of the unaccompanied voice at dramatic moments. Both of these will become favoured methods in Holst’s operatic works. The use of tonal changes in this opera is somewhat predictable and not particularly sophisticated: generally speaking, a new emotion or a new development in the story is accompanied by a new key. By the time Holst reached *Sīta* he would put the same idea to work, except with more finesse, and the method of applying this “technique” is harder to detect. The use of the solo voice at grand, dramatic moments will be used in *Sīta* as well, but only in the later portions, and not with as much efficacy as in *Sāvitrī*.

Due to the resounding success of the earlier *Ianthē*, Holst and Hart were now once again asked by Mrs. Newman to create another children’s operetta. *The Idea* was completed some time in 1896 and is in two acts. Hart, in his recollections of his collaborations with Holst, referred to *The Idea* in his article in the RCM Magazine.

A year later we wrote a more workmanlike operetta for the same Theatre-Royal-back-drawing-room...It was a capital little work,

---

13 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 4.
especially on the composer’s part, and much more characteristic of the future Gustav than might have been expected...

Hart, vol. 39 no. 2, p 45

The vocal score was published in 1903 and was included in Novello’s children’s music catalogue for more than fifty years. Its duration was one hour, including the spoken dialogue, and it was again performed once at the school by the pupils of St. Mary’s directed from the piano by the composer. The date of the performance is unknown.

A careful look at The Idea reveals what appears to be a sudden reversion of Holst’s development were it not for the fact that, once again, he was writing specifically for children. This was no place for emotional turmoil or highly sophisticated musical structures. The Idea has the feel of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta with its shorter numbers and engaging tunes, and uses rather small instrumental forces: flute, oboe, clarinet in A, horn in F, and strings, again a condition possibly imposed on him by the availability of the instruments and/or the players. It is a typical numbers opera and the layout is as follows:

Act 1
I Chorus and Solo. “We come with anxious hearts to learn”
II Song (Queen). “I would inform my sweet”
III Trio (King, Queen, Sentry). “With pleasure I remark”
IV Finale * (all principals and chorus). “Come, all good people”
 (*Prime Minister introduced here, as well as dance music)

Act 2
V Chorus. “Our system new is being tried”
VI Song (Caroline and Queen). “If I should say”
VII Duet (Mona and Sentry). “With aspect stern”
VIII Song (King). “In byegone days”
IX Quartet (King, Queen, Prime Minister and Caroline) “He has done his best”
X Finale “His notion was very poor”
The rhythms throughout are rather simplistic, and the names and rhymes are reminiscent of nursery rhymes:

Sing hey for Sir Coddle,
he’s brains in his noddle
He’s brains in his noddle I ween,
And as for Sir Wooler
of learning he’s fuller
His equal has never been seen.

The songs and numbers are rife with “fa-la-la” and other short refrains (3.16). There was no overture as such to The Idea and its prelude is a mere two-and-a-half pages in length; the curtain already rises at bar 23, reminding one of the works preceding The Magic Mirror. There are indications where intermittent dialogue occurred, but the text is not included in the manuscript. These moments of dialogue (and marked in the score as “Dialogue”) are always preceded by chords held by a fermata. It is probably not surprising that The Idea is “imitation Sullivan from beginning to end” (Holst, I., 1986, p 10) but demonstrates Holst’s good stage sense when writing for children, enabling them to act while continuing to sing.

The first violin usually doubles the melodic line, possibly as musical support for singing children. Comparison with, say, Lansdown Castle shows the same kind of layout of songs, ensembles (and now, dances as well), but there is more sophistication in the contrapuntal writing which does not lose sight of the fact that it is written for young children to perform.

In spite of the fact that The Idea was published, Holst did not include this work in his own list of compositions. Novello evidently felt that it was useful repertoire to have

\[14\] All the dialogue is included in the published edition.
in their children’s catalogue, but Holst may have left it out for two reasons: it was again a request for a work to be performed that was only needed on one occasion by St. Mary’s School and, more significantly, Holst could have felt that it was not a challenging project and would do nothing for the development of his compositional skills.

Holst’s last operetta for children was among several pantomimes again written for St. Mary’s School. The composition date of the Fairy Pantomime of Cinderella is unknown but it was performed at the school under Holst’s direction on 14 and 15 April 1902. None of the music has survived, but writers are fairly certain that the music would have been in the same style as Ianthe or The Idea (Short, 1990, p 43; Holst, I., 1974a, p 234). It is not known whether Hart was the librettist. However, Cinderella was performed closer to the time of The Youth’s Choice (which had quite a different sound as we shall see), and this brings forth certain questions. Due to its nature as children’s operetta was Cinderella therefore similar to the two previous works, or did the intervening six years have an effect on Holst’s technique despite the fact that it was meant for children?

The final opera of Holst’s early group was composed in 1902 when Holst was already a professional musician, namely trombonist and répétiteur with the Carl Rosa Opera Company. The Youth’s Choice Op 11 was described by the composer as a musical idyll in one act, and is considered to be his first serious opera. Imogen Holst thought it a failure due to its “impossible libretto” (Holst, I., 1986, p 7). It was the first libretto that Holst wrote himself (the doubt regarding Cinderella notwithstanding),

---

15 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 5.
and he made liberal use of picturesque, archaic language that had little meaning. Vaughan Williams, whom he had met at the Royal College and who was now a close friend, warned him about this use of the language, but to no avail. Much of the problem was the Wagner worship in which Holst was enmeshed since the later period at the College. Thanks to friends like Hart, who took him to performances of several of the music dramas, he was now obsessed with Wagner. This was the point at which he felt a need to change his compositional approach and attempt to emulate the style of his new idol. The sound-world of Tristan and the Ring dominated his thinking.

It may be useful here to point out that at the time of The Youth’s Choice Holst was also working on Sita which became the first of his two Sanskrit operas and was quite possibly the most Wagnerian of all his compositions, so his absorption of Wagnerian sound and the beginnings of his study of Sanskrit and Indian epic poetry coincided somewhat. Sita was begun most likely in 1899, so Holst had been at work on it for approximately three years by the time of The Youth’s Choice; the style of the early part of Sita was already ornate and chromatic in its harmony and this is reflected in the opus 11.

Holst entered The Youth’s Choice in a competition for one-act operas organised by Ricordi, an Italian publishing firm. He worked quickly to finish it, gave it to an Italian friend in Cheltenham to translate into Italian, and finally sent it to Milan in time for the January deadline. There were over two hundred entries from which three were short-listed. Unfortunately, Holst’s was not one of them, but poor musicianship may

---

16 In the manuscript the Italian translation appears in red ink in a different hand below Holst’s English text.
not have been the cause. “In the course of its deliberations, the jury had rejected all works which were not based on a good libretto, however good the music, so that The Youth’s Choice may have failed simply because of its words, without a note of the score being examined by the judges” (Short, 1990, p 47). This is a possibility that is credible considering the wording of the text. The antiquated, pretentious vocabulary in their rather awkward combinations may well have hindered singers who would have tried to perform them:

Forth rode Sir Ronald on his way,
his sobbing bride beside him,
Naught heeded he the fearful storm,
naught cared what might betide him.
“Rouse thee now, oh wife”, cried he
for bitter was her weeping.
“Rouse thee now oh wife for soon
within my castle walls love,
thou shalt be sleeping.”

And later in the first scene:

(Younger Sister): Now let me hear thee
Proclaim it right boldly
How dearly thou lov’st her
Truly and tenderly.

(Knight): Fain would I say it
But that thy bright glance dazzles mine eyes
Naught else can I think of
Thy poor slave am I.

It is not altogether surprising that the wording of the libretto gives such an effect, for Fritz Hart recalls Holst telling him of the “technique” he used to write out “his rhymed verses. He ground out the rhymes first and then wrote the lines leading up to
them!” (Hart, p 86). This revelation may well account for the awkward verses and hence the lack of success of the libretto of *The Youth's Choice.*

The idyll comprises two scenes: the first is “The Legend of the Youth’s Choice” and the second “The Ending of the Legend”. Holst had by now adopted the idea of endless flow of melody for, even though the curtain falls between the two scenes, the music continues, uninterrupted. At the beginning, a long prelude precedes the appearance of the Father whose voice is first heard from behind the dark red curtain that covers the back of the stage. The story begins as he reads the legend of the Youth’s Choice from a book that has been lying on the table, centre stage. Certain Holstian characteristics are developing in this work: as well as his beloved effect of the voice heard off-stage (already used in smaller vocal works and partsongs) the opening words of the Youth’s story reveal the love of mysticism that was so important in the stage works as well as many of the orchestral works, including *The Planets:* “And whence a rosy light shone out with radiance, mystic rare”. As the Younger Sister and Elder Sister settle down to listen to their Father tell the story of the Youth’s Choice the stage directions read “from here until the end of the scene the red glow of sunset gradually deepens”. The use of rosy or reddish light has already become a prominent feature of the serious stage works, and plays an important symbolic rôle in *Sita,* the opera that was already in progress at this time. Musically as well, the endless flow of melody mentioned above is chromatic in nature and this is reflected in the harmonic progressions (3.17). Modality comes into play in several of the themes that are introduced early in the work. Disappointingly, not many themes are developed throughout, giving the

---

17 It is not possible to ascertain whether the judges assessed the libretto in Italian or in the original English; the Italian translation is in the modern language, without the archaic touches. In that case, the weakness of the story line (as they saw it) would account for the opera’s downfall.
impression that, overall, the work has not been well planned, that it is too “loose” in construction. One particular theme worth recording is that which is heard at the opening of the opera and is used throughout somewhat covertly in inner voices of the orchestra in sequences, etc. Its reappearance near the end again in a bolder context reminiscent of the opening and at an important junction in the story gives the feel of an overall ternary design (3.18). Texturally, much thought has gone into the use of vertical blocks of sound, including chords, examples of which are taken from both *The Magic Mirror* and *The Youth’s Choice* (3.19).

However, even though the aspect of the use and re-use of themes was not a particular success, Holst was thinking more of structure and its expression in terms of keys, as he did in *The Magic Mirror* and was continually improving in *Sita*; also melodic chromaticism begins to be in evidence more in this work. His understanding of the potential of orchestral instruments was also coming to the fore now, with more specialist techniques and sonorous effects being used. Closer to the end of the work the use of solo voices to help accentuate certain lines or dramatic moments are again put into play.  

By 1902 Holst had come to the end of what might be called his early period of operatic writing. Stylistically, it was a turbulent, and therefore a very fascinating, decade. Beginning with an all-consuming infatuation in 1892 with the sound of Gilbert and Sullivan he proceeded by allowing both musical and non-musical interests

---

18 Another aspect of dramatic writing that did not seem to concern Holst in these early days was that of dramatic pacing. The lack of attention to pacing produced a weakness in the flow of the drama, such as that of *The Youth’s Choice*. Holst’s understanding and sensitivity to this vital element was about to change.
to shape the sound of future projects owing to his highly inquisitive nature and fertile imagination. The period 1892-1902 saw the progression from the Gilbert and Sullivan imitations to the exploration of new harmonies and methods of musical dramatic writing, thanks mostly to the art of Wagner, the other all-consuming infatuation of his student years. Combined with this was his love of literature and poetry as well as the singular interest in stories from Sanskrit epics, producing a repertoire that was unique to Holst and one that was reflected in later works.

The vast majority of other compositions around this time were on a rather small scale, many were vocal and all still had a tendency toward the romantic style and allowed Holst to make use of the poetic texts he so loved. But the growing frustration with what he felt was a lack of individuality also produced this paring down of vocal and orchestral forces so that, for example, there are works inspired by the Sanskrit which demonstrate a very nineteenth-century sound such as the tone poem *Indra* of 1903, while earlier, as with *The Magic Mirror*, he was on his way to constructing a more intimate opera with two characters and a smaller ensemble of musicians—a combination that would yield a Sanskrit-inspired masterpiece by 1908, but at this time was still in its infancy, a rather self-conscious, awkward stage.

From 1902, the year of *The Youth's Choice*, to the time Holst finished *Sita* in 1906, two types of Holstian sound existed uncomfortably side by side as he tried to reconcile them. He continued to suffer the "perspiration and agony while [hearing] the sound of his own inexperience" as Stanford had taught (Stanford, p 219). Slowly, however, the highly charged chromatic writing was eclipsed by the more understated and very expressive sound of the more mature composer, but not without continued
struggle, encapsulated in Sita which had been evolving steadily in the background for most of this decade. Sita grew directly out of this time but the development that it exhibits takes it out of the realm of early opera and places it into a class of its own, for it is a fine example of a blend of Holst's contrasting approaches, as well as the fine-tuning of certain tastes in staging effects, etc. attempted in earlier works, and new ideas that were carried on into future masterpieces.

The purpose of a discussion of what might be deemed trivial, youthful works is twofold. First, however brief or unimportant (to the composer's output as well as in the opinion of the man himself) the compositions, they highlight the varied interests and influences that reflect the period in question. In Holst's case, the disparate elements of Sullivan, Wagner, literature, Sanskrit epic poetry, folk song and Elizabethan music (whether or not they overlapped, in the chronological sense) came together in a personal way. This mosaic of influence was directly responsible for the early works, and the "trivial" works prove useful in understanding Holst's early period as a whole.

Secondly, and more significantly: however short or unimportant the early operas may be in the light of Holst's total yield, they ultimately enabled him to proceed and produce the more important operatic works of what might be called the middle period (during which Sanskrit texts prevailed as subject matter). The work of the early period consolidated, which then allowed him to move on to the next stage of his operatic path.
4. “As for Opera, I am Bewildered”: *Sita*, op 23

The *Ramayana* is one of India’s two greatest works of epic poetry. Sanskrit for “the story of Rama”, it was reputedly written by the poet Valmiki in the third century B.C.E. The *Ramayana* consists of seven books comprising 24,000 couplets and exists in three versions. Rama is the chief character—a prince who is the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu. The work begins with Rama’s birth and education. The classic story tells of Rama bending the great bow of a certain king and winning the hand of the king’s daughter, Sita. Rama is then deprived of the throne of Ayodhya to which he is the rightful heir. He and Sita are sent into exile, where they live in a forest. Sita is abducted by the seven-headed Ravana and taken to the kingdom of Lanka (Ceylon). With the aid of an army of monkeys led by their king, and an army of bears, Rama slays Ravana and rescues Sita. Rama then returns to Ayodhya and is restored to the throne.

Holst decided upon a slightly altered version of the story, one which portrays Sita as the daughter of the goddess of the Earth. As in *Savitri* later, Holst dispensed with the hero’s princely connections and focussed on the more human issues raised in the story, in this case, trust and betrayal. The concept of Mother Earth in this libretto is an interesting one. Mother Earth is not part of the legend put forth in the *Ramayana*. Sita was a princess, not a superhuman being. So where did Holst get the idea of Mother Earth and why incorporate it into his version?

The answer most likely lies with Wagner. As pointed out earlier, Holst saw a performance of *Die Götterdämmerung* in 1892, and the impact upon him was
enormous. With the deep-rooted nature of a dramatist he would have absorbed the synthesis of the vast scale of the drama and the highly emotional music. Robert Donington suggests that Wagner’s main sources for the text of the *Ring* were the Poetic (Elder) Edda and the Prose (Younger) Edda, the epic writing of Icelandic mythology. Wagner took what he wanted from the rich treasury of myths and stories and “adapted it and added to it as he wanted” (Donington, 1963, p 32). This is a precursor of the adaptations Holst made to the *Ramayana* for the purposes of his libretto.

Erda is a character from *Das Rheingold*, whose name of course suggests ‘Erde’, the German word for ‘earth’. Regarding her appearance in the music drama “the light of day fades strangely, and out of the earth, lit by an uncanny green-blue light of its own, a woman’s figure emerges to half its height...” It is Erda, the Earth Mother (Donington, 1963, p 108).

As far as staging is concerned there are already two important links to *Sita*: firstly, the idea of Mother Earth rising up out of the stage floor (i.e. out of the earth, although in *Sita* she appears enthroned and in her entirety, whereas it is Sita who rises from the depths), and secondly the aspect of lighting. Holst was very particular about lighting, especially the use of deepening red glow to symbolise coming evil deeds, an effect he used here and again in *Sāvitrī*. As will be remembered from the previous chapter specifications regarding rosy or deepening reddish light already appeared in early operas such as *The Magic Mirror* and *The Youth’s Choice*, and Holst continued to develop this effect. Mother Earth summons Vishnu to help free humankind of the evil Ravana, thereby demonstrating her superior wisdom and understanding. As well, she
knows that Rama is in need of her daughter Sita to help him in this task. In Wagner’s own words Erda is “the eternal woman possessed of all the world’s wisdom” (Wagner, cited in Donington, 1963, p 108). As, later, with Sita’s Mother Earth, “Erda only appears in the Ring at moments of profound uncertainty and desperate need. When she does appear, she shows a knowledge of the underlying situation which none of the more conscious protagonists possesses” (Donington, 1963, p 109). In the libretto Erda also speaks of “Three daughters primevally conceived, my womb bore”.

Dispensing with the crossing of cultures, Holst seems to treat Sita as a kind of Rhine maiden.

Holst familiarised himself with the Ramayana through Griffith’s book and was particularly enamoured with the story of Rama and Sita. It is not clear whether he began the opera in 1899 or in 1900, but the earliest sketches (not extant) were drafted by 1901. This has been indicated by a letter dated 17 January 1901 from an Indian friend, Romesh Date, who had expressed his delight that Holst was writing an opera based on the Ramayana. However, Vaughan Williams made suggestions for alterations to the libretto due to his apprehension regarding some of the wording which he regarded as archaic, the same misgivings he had regarding The Youth’s Choice in 1902. These comments were appreciated and duly noted by Holst, and several revisions to the libretto appeared over the next few years. By 1902 Holst was already feeling displeased with the musical progress of his opera; he began to sense that the work was turning out to be second-rate imitation Wagner rather than something uniquely his own. In a letter to Vaughan Williams from Germany in 1903 Holst wrote the oft-quoted passage:
As for opera I am bewildered. 'Die Feuersnot' is in reality quite simple and unoriginal as opera. Charpentier’s ‘Louise’ is idiotic as opera. And I do feel sometimes inclined to chuck Sita in case it is only bad Richard I [Wagner].

Vaughan Williams, U., and Holst, L., eds 1959, p 12

He continued reworking and revising until 1906 by which time his own maturation and outside musical influences eclipsed his fixation with Teutonic chromaticism.

Raymond Head remarked that Holst probably relied on Griffith’s translation for the source of this libretto: “the only other way he could have found this story was by reading 25,000 stanzas in Sanskrit, a task for which he was simply not equipped” (Head, 1986, p 5).

The phrase familiar to any reader of Holst’s biography “good old Wagnerian bawling” is how he himself described Sita in 1917 in a letter to W.G. Whittaker, and yet the work is an important step towards his stylistic liberation. In the same article of 1986 Head makes the point that, musically, Sita has never been discussed in any Holst study, but then he limits himself to an outline of the action of the story. His observation still rings true today; Sita is unknown to the general musical public, both in its story and its musical content, its manuscript still lying unpublished in the archives of the British Library. Jon C. Mitchell quite rightly says that it remains unperformed and that it “deserves a better fate” (Mitchell, 2001, p 54). It may not have been possible to perform in the early years of the twentieth century due to the

complicated staging involved, but theatre has developed rapidly during the last hundred years; it is therefore to be hoped that something can now be done to bring this work to life.

While working on *Sita* it is clear that Holst was not primarily concerned with straightforward practicalities of performance; he was already under the influence of the Sanskrit sources and he worked on it above all out of an inner creative need. He continued to develop *Sita* over the next few years. Early in 1905 incentive to finish the opera came in the form of a competition established by the Milan music publisher Tito Ricordi for an opera by an English composer. There was a cash prize of £500 and a guaranteed performance of the work; in addition the winner would have 40 per cent share of the performing fees. The judges were Ricordi, Percy Pitt, Joseph Bennett and Charles Stanford. The closing date was 31 December of 1906 but the committee wanted entrants to submit a summary of the libretto to aid them in short-listing the contestants. Holst’s opera was still unfinished but he sent a libretto to Ricordi. Of a total entry of 191 libretti 52 were chosen among which was *Sita* (Short 1990, p 55).

All the available evidence suggests that Holst quickened his pace in order to finish the opera in time for submission. Fritz Hart recalled Holst saying that

...he was playing the “big bow-wow”, as he expressed it. I used to sing—as best I could—every voice-part in this work as he played it to me, two or three times a week. When it was finished Vaughan Williams, S. [Sidney] P. Waddington, Gustav and I...took part in a general run-through of the opera, Waddington making an incredibly good job of reading at sight a tremendously awkward and none too legible piano-score. The rest of us—including the composer—sang or howled what we could.

Hart, vol. 39 no. 3, p 84
After completing Act I progress was impeded by his recurrent neuritis which began to make writing very difficult. Friends rallied around to help him finish the task.

Gustav hikes over to East Sheen one morning and said that R.V.W. had given him twenty pounds to pay for a professional amanuensis, and hoped that I would accept the job. Of course I agreed, and would have done so without the consideration of the twenty pounds...but Gustav insisted upon giving me the money in advance...And thus it happened that I had the privilege of taking down the second and third acts of *Sita* from dictation. Gustav would sit at the piano with pieces of untidy manuscript before him, on which were almost undecipherable scrawls in pencil, while I sat at a small table beside him. It was slow work at first, but before long we evolved a mutually satisfactory technique and the large score grew more and more rapidly, until after some months of work the final double-bars were drawn.

Hart, vol. 39 no. 3, p 84

In January of 1906 the *Morning Post* carried the news of the result of the competition; out of the 52 approved libretti 29 had been set to music and the judges had decided to award the prize to Edward Naylor for his opera *The Angelus*. However two other operas had been placed second in order of merit, one of which was Holst’s *Sita*. Hart remembered that Stanford had “disliked *Sita* intensely and unreasonably, and told Gustav that even if the other judges had voted for it he would have voted against it, if for no other reason that Gustav had written passages for voices in bare fourths!” (Hart, vol. 39, no. 3, 1943, p 85) (4.1a, 4.1b). The somewhat innovative use of “bare fourths” that found such disfavour with Stanford are, however, one of the indications in this work of Holstian change, since he used this kind of “bare” writing in much later material, most notably *Egdon Heath* of 1927 which would be inconceivable without this kind of harmony. Short (1990, p 72) postulates that “as it emerged that

---

2 The manuscript of Act I is entirely in Holst’s hand (except for certain “patches” that have been glued overtop of some earlier version); only parts of Acts II and III are in Hart’s.
3 The manuscripts do not have bar numbers; the references used throughout in the music examples are Holst’s own page numbering.
another of the judges had cast his vote in favour of *Sita*, it is possible that the prize-winner had been chosen as a compromise in the face of irreconcilable opinions."

Although it was an honour to tie for second place, Holst realised miserably how close he had actually come to winning. He was devastated by the fact that he did not win the cash prize, but also by the realisation that all the hard work by so many had, it seemed, been in vain. Vaughan Williams wrote a letter of consolation (the same one that is inevitably quoted when the background of this work is discussed) in which he commiserated with Holst on not having won the £500 and the promise of a performance, but continued by pointing out that Holst had not "been put in the awful position when 'all men speak well of you'...Think, the awful stigma to have gone through life with a prize opera on your back...after all, the most important thing is that you've written a big work and that you aren't in the awful position of being continually praised by those whose opinions and methods you despise in every way" (Vaughan Williams, U. and Holst, I., eds. 1959, p 45).

Holst was invited by Ricordi to send the score to their Milan office for possible publication; after a long wait the disappointing news came that Ricordi would not publish. Of all the significant (and suitably larger-scale) works of Holst's early period *Sita* is the only one that was not published.

*Sita* is largely ignored in discussions of Holst's music. Perhaps it is because it has never been performed and would indeed present formidable problems in staging, or possibly because of the scarcity of promoters. Instead, reference to it tends to revolve around the anecdotes and opinions already put forward by previous writers. This
seems to be the extent to which writers and researchers have been willing to go with respect to this work. Terms like “Wagnerian” and “exaggerated” are used to describe the opera, after which the writer is content to move on to “more important” (i.e. more well-known) compositions. There is no doubt that it is a youthful work, but space should be devoted to a thorough study of the music which will strive to put *Sita* in its proper perspective. The fact that it is such a large-scale work, that it was Holst’s first large-scale work, and that it was completed at a time of turbulent change in the composer’s approach all make *Sita* a vital link between Holst the composer of the “Early Horrors” and the Holst of *Sâvitri*.

There are three dimensions to *Sita* which make it an interesting study for this period in Holst’s development: the Wagnerian excesses (“bawling”), the transitional moments where certain trademarks of his future language are starting to appear, and the much more mature Holst characterized by elements that will appear in *Sâvitri* as well as in later works. As stated earlier, *Sita* took approximately six years to complete—a generous span of time during which to experiment and change his approach to the text and the story. Since the opera was composed in chronological order, much of the newer style is to be found in the last act.

In order for the reader to get a general feel for the work it will be useful initially to travel through it chronologically. Early sections of the opera are a testament to the liberal use of chromatic writing that still captivated Holst at this time. The Prologue consists of very stately music in measured tempo as Mother Earth prays to Vishnu for help in battling Lord Ravana—the most important evil force in the work. In Act I

---

4 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 6.
evidence abounds of the style of musical language that we are about to experience.
Shortly before action begins on stage the scene is being set for the battle, using string
effects that do not have a clear musical path but rush hither and thither creating a
sense of panic (4.2). The opening scene of Act I proper depicts a battle with all the
suitable drama of chromatic descending and ascending scales (4.3). As in the first
example it is the cumulative sound rather than the individual lines that produce the
desired effect.

Rama’s brother Lakshman has been set upon by an army of rakshas and has been
rendered unconscious. As he falls to the ground, the apparent tragedy is enhanced by
the full orchestra swelling to an agonised adagio \textit{fff}, as we assume that he has been
killed. As Lakshman awakens to the elation of the others who thought him killed,
Holst’s sense of dramatic purpose is portrayed by the orchestra. Woodwinds and
strings again hasten upwards and downwards respectively as the strings then slow to a
solitary brass chord that is the backdrop for this important event (4.4). As Lakshman
rises and comes forward the orchestra foregoes its pensive mood and anticipates the
joyous occasion with the strings in their now familiar role of producing a mass of
chromatic sound. Towards the end of Act I the concoction of Ravana’s vengeful plot
to kidnap Sita is accompanied by the full force of an angry orchestra, Holst’s version
of the height of Wagnerian drama (4.5). The middle of Act II reveals a treatment of
dramatic situation not unlike the earlier part of the opera. A challenge from Sita to
Lakshman to help Rama whom she believes to be in danger in the forest calls up bold
brass writing. Rushing woodwinds highlight the angry altercation between the two
characters (4.6).
Holst’s own reference to bawling naturally refers to his view of the vocal style of the work; many examples abound, particularly in the earlier parts of the opera such as Rama’s prayer to the gods for a companion early in Act I (4.7). Holst had a predilection for dramatic high-held notes and Rama’s prayer shows a similar treatment, particularly at the words “Hear me ye gods”. This effect is well remembered when Sita appears and acknowledges Rama as her husband (4.8). It is well to keep in mind that the characters in \textit{Sita} are meant to be perceived as being larger than life (mainly superhuman in the theological sense), so first appearances by new characters tend to be treated with much dramatic pomp. With the arrival of Surpanakha—the evil sister of the equally evil Lord Ravana—comes the declaration that she is Rama’s enemy (4.9). Highly dramatic is her threat that death is nigh for Rama, the slayer of so many of her brother’s forces (4.10); also very dramatic is her reaction to Rama’s spurning insult. Holst’s vocal treatment of these highly-charged moments tends to be somewhat formulaic as the voice soars and sustains a high pitch (4.11). The orchestra, in suitably Wagnerian style, responds with rushing strings.

Act II sees more of the same vocal treatment such as the scene in which Maritcha, the general of Ravana’s army hails his lord. As he pays homage to Ravana his voice soars accompanied by fury in the strings and winds, a sound very similar to that of the previous example (4.12). At the approach of Ravana the army of rakshas (the male chorus) excitedly exclaim “Ravana comes!” on their high-held pitches (4.13). “Ravana hail, Ravana Dread One” is given suitable treatment. Interesting to note here is the brass accompaniment—an insistent, repetitive militaristic rhythm that foreshadows the driving force of “Mars”.
When Ravana explains to his army the need for avenging the insult to his sister by hunting down Rama and his brother, and kidnapping Sita for himself, his vocal line is an interesting mixture of bombast and the chromatic line on which Holst relied so much in this work. The orchestral accompaniment also supports the singing with predominantly step-wise and chromatic motion (4.14). At Sita’s kidnapping she is challenged by Ravana who has just revealed his true identity: will she be his bride or his slave? Her shock at this pronouncement elicits one of Holst’s special high-held pitches. Unlike her joyous singing when she appears to Rama in Act I, this is a reaction of horror at Ravana’s words (4.15). Holst indicates in the score that the coming lines should be sung “with a supreme effort” as Sita defies Ravana, claiming that she is the daughter of the Earth for whom rakshas are sworn enemies. He has spoken his doom and over his head flies Yama, the god of Death. Ravana wins this war of wills as he calls to the Darkness to encompass the Earth on a suitably high and long-held pitch. The element of tension in the action is extremely intense and is enhanced by the unrelenting “bawling” throughout the scene. Thus Holst ends the second act with the kidnap of Sita.

Dramatic vocal tension continues throughout the work. Even Imogen Holst somewhat grudgingly concedes that “in spite of all its extravagance it is possible to recognize his own music striving to be heard” (Holst, I. 1986, p 16). A casual look at the manuscripts reveals a transition that indicates new elements in Holst’s thinking while he continued under the influence of the late nineteenth-century idiom.

The use of the chorus of the Voices of the Earth during the Prologue to Act I, a female choir hidden from view (4.16) became a favourite effect of otherworldliness in quite a
number of works such as *Sâvitri* (the voice of Mâyâ), Neptune from *The Planets* (1914-1916), and *The Splendour Falls* from a set of part songs of 1905 to words of Tennyson. This last example shows that he was already aware of the possibilities of this effect in small-scale pieces as well as in a full-scale opera.

He draws attention to the voices themselves by withholding any accompaniment, with divisi strings, *ppp*, joining in only on the voices' final chord. These are characteristics of some of the best of the Holst vocal writing. The Voices of the Earth are heard once more at the end of the opera to re-introduce Mother Earth (4.17). The style is similar to that of the Prologue when they were first heard; however at this point they are accompanied by a gentle rumble of the timpani and a cello pedal.

Very often Holst's characters' vocal lines are not constrained by traditional metres; rather, the musical lines are adapted to the text which often requires frequent changes of metre. This naturally imparts a flowing effect, something that is associated with Wagnerian music drama as well as reflecting an element of the Tudor music that he so admired. Holst adopted this way of writing for operatic voices (if not for all songs and part songs) and it remained with him in future works of the genre. *Sâvitri* is an outstanding example of this type of vocal writing, as are some of the songs from the *Vedic Hymns* which precede *Sâvitri*. A good earlier example of this declamatory free sound, or arioso style, comes with the story of Ravana's battle with Indra as told by Maritcha, chief of the raksha army, at the beginning of Act II (4.18).

Holst's so-called Sanskrit period coincided with the new influence of the folksong idiom, and he found potential freedom from the tyranny of key signatures in the sound
of modal and chordal writing (4.19). He used it throughout—a sign of the modality of the future as well as of contemporaneous works such as the Two Songs without Words and the Somerset Rhapsody, the latter of which was based on actual folk melodies, as we have seen. Imogen Holst isolated an example of Holst's sound “striving to be heard” in one of these modal passages, “a seven-four tune in a Phrygian scale with a sharpened sixth” (Holst, l. 1986, p 16). No further details are given in the literature regarding this passage, but one fitting this description has been located in Act III as a theme sung by Rama in the Phrygian scale on C with A in the melodic line as opposed to A-flat (4.20). This is an interesting passage in seven-four time; Holst does not strive here to give the impression of metrical freedom. These phrases, sung by Rama, have a very symmetrical feel, a regular phrase structure within the metre. The words flow in a natural four-plus-three with a clear downbeat. As a further indication of the Holstian style that was to come the accompaniment doubles the vocal line, which seems to add a sense of dignity to the scene; as well, one hears the underpinning of a pedal note. This calls to mind many moments in Sāvitri where the solo voice carries the music alone with only a pedal for support.

One of the characteristics of Holst’s writing that scholars tend to point out was his interest in frequent changes of metre, mainly for the sake of fluidity in vocal works. This happens infrequently in Sīta, but the final moments of Act II do give an indication of trends to come (4.21).

Mention has already been made of Holst’s use of the pedal note and its importance in his later works. There are quite a number of examples in Sīta and they tend to be found in what might be called the transitional parts of the work, roughly speaking, the
second act. Holst seems to develop a penchant for it, beginning with the music of the prelude of Act II (4.22). Low strings support an important theme heard in the upper instruments, a theme which has been used before and will re-appear in the interlude between the first and second scenes of the third act. The pedal is also used to emphasize the effect of stillness in the action, such as at the departure of the raksha army when the stage suddenly becomes empty and the darkness is broken by the appearance of early dawn. The music becomes almost motionless—as empty as the stage itself (4.23).

As a harbinger of techniques used in the later Vedic Hymns and in Sāvitrī there is an increase in the use of solo vocal lines with minimal accompaniment, very often a simple but effective pedal note. As we hear Ravana concocting his plot to capture Rama and Lakshman with his golden fawn the violins sustain the interval of a third, moving downward slowly by chromatic steps. This time it is not a bass pedal that supports sounds above it, but a sustained dyad that hovers above the voice (4.24). Again, it is possible to have Sāvitrī in mind when discovering the use of the solo voice holding its own, even in a score requiring such full orchestral forces. Holst is finding his economy of expression in scenes wherein a character is telling a story, the action of which is not visible to the audience but that needs clarification for the plot to make sense. Lakshman’s telling of the unsuccessful hunt after the fawn is done in Holstian parlante style, with certain words punctuated here and there with what seems like commentary from orchestral instruments (4.25). Ravana’s orders to his men regarding the campaign to kidnap Sita and imprison the men must be carefully enunciated and heard by all (raksha and audience member alike) and he does so with a

\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{5}}\text{A more thorough discussion of the harmonic organisation will follow.}]}
completely unaccompanied line quasi parlante. Again Holst is discovering the maximum effect that can be achieved with minimal force (4.26).

It is clear that Holst was altering his musical approach to the interpretation of certain dramatic situations, and that some instances were evidence of the Wagnerian in him and others indicated the musical economist—an idiom that came to the fore in later works and indeed in later parts of this opera. But the pull in opposing directions must have caused considerable frustration during the composition process, which is a possible reason for Sita having taken so long to complete. In a cry of despair to Vaughan Williams in a letter of 1903 Holst considered “chucking Sita” for fear that it was simply bad Wagner; it is not known where he was with regard to the work, but 1903 was the mid-point of its gestation period. Most likely folksong affected his musical concepts during the later stages, however, when aspects that tended to appear sporadically somehow congealed into a newer sound, something that he could more readily call his own. He had finally allowed Wagner to “lead him to fresh things”, a hope that he had expressed to Vaughan Williams (Vaughan Williams, U. and Holst, I., eds. 1959, p 12), and he had discovered the dramatist within.

A marvellous example of Holst as dramatist occurs during the second scene of Act III, in what may be the pièce de résistance of the entire opera as Rama’s men begin to build a bridge over the raging torrent in their attempt to reach the kingdom of Lanka. Wooden hammers are required and the tempo of the hammering remains consistent throughout regardless of the changes of tempo or metre of the music. The hammering and the singing of the workmen begins “in the far distance” and will get louder as the
scene develops giving the impression of the men slowly approaching the action on stage (4.27).

It is with this scene that the orchestral forces are noticeably lessened; one could argue that since there is singing in the distance it is necessary to keep the sound to a minimum, but from this point to the end Holst never builds up his orchestra the way he had in the early part of the opera even in moments of drama and intensity that may have justified it. In other words he found the economy of expression that became one of the vital elements of his style and which he used to great effect in Sävitri.

Looking through this portion of the work one can pinpoint “Holstian” features such as the minimal orchestration. It is a very characteristic Holstian musical moment in which he combines parlante singing (the voice of Ravana) and the pedal effects forming a minimal accompaniment (a chord sustained by the violas, and the pitches in the woodwinds); the minimal accompaniment “forces” the ear to focus on the voices of Ravana and the bridge builders (4.28), as well as the distant hammering that has just begun, which succeeds in highlighting the dramatic tension.

Generally speaking, accompaniment in this final act has become more static; there are many repeated or sustained chords as opposed to the rushing scales and arpeggios that Holst felt were required earlier in the work for heightened expression. Themes that emerge in the orchestra achieve clarity due to the relative inactivity of the surrounding sound.

---

It may be of interest to observe that “minimal orchestration” does not mean a lessening of the number of players, or instruments. The orchestration remains the same throughout, however Holst is more particular about which instruments are used, their number, and for what purpose.
In the realm of vocal interaction the opening “duet” in Sâvitri between Sâvitri and Death is foreshadowed here in the simultaneous but opposing lines of Ravana reacting to the bridge-builders’ song in the distance. It is counterpoint in the most literal sense of the word; the lines are heard together but are markedly different in character producing the impression of conflict rather than of unity. Once more the accompaniment is minimal, providing harmonic support while some chromatic motion lends tension to the scene (4.29).

The hammering effect ceases momentarily when Sita appears on stage; however the chorus of workers continues in the distance. Again this may be for practical reasons as Sita, realizing that Rama is coming to her rescue, sings her prayer to the Sun; hammering may ruin the lyrical effect of the moment. Holst again uses minimal accompaniment and restrained dramatic touches such as the upward sweep of a harp arpeggio at the words “Hail the sun’s uprising” whereas in earlier parts (i.e. earlier years in the development of the work) we may have been subjected to excesses of instrumentation at such a moment of emotional intensity (4.30).

Even performance directions such as “wildly” do not induce him to former methods of writing; the musical motion is relatively static and the orchestration minimal despite the ff marking, forcing the passion and intensity to come from the players and singers rather than the number of notes that can be fitted into each bar.

The scene with the bridge builders, despite the fact that it is the approach to the climax of the story, does not seem climactic on paper but would most likely be highly
effective on stage due to the straightforward treatment of the material, i.e. the simpler rhythms such as straight crotchets and “strong” intervals such as fourths, fifths and sixths. It is no surprise that Imogen Holst could at least have seen that “the dramatic repetition of the distant hammering of the bridge-builders... is one of the few moments in the whole opera that shows any real grasp of the possibilities of writing for the stage...”(Holst, I. 1986, p 16). She insists that

Most of the work still seems like ‘good old Wagnerian bawling’.
But towards the end a change comes over the music, and the beautifully calm phrases of the hidden chorus representing the Voice [sic] of the Earth are in Holst’s own language.

(Holst, I., 1986, p 134)

This may be so, but she neglects the fact that the Voices of the Earth were used in act I as Sita appears for the first time, rising from beneath the stage, so Holst had this effect in mind from the beginning. Similarly, certain themes symbolising Mother Earth were used in the Prologue as well as in the final scene to lend continuity when she reappears, and to make the work come full circle as Mother Earth sends her daughter into the world at the beginning and returns at the end to claim her back. But the hidden chorus of the Voices of the Earth music does anticipate Sāvitrī with what Imogen Holst referred to as its “floating sixths”, as in example 4.17 (Holst, I., 1986, p 12).

Act III sees greater use of Holstian techniques that were slowly becoming apparent earlier on; examples include the unaccompanied voice holding its own during moments of dramatic power, Rama demanding of Surpanakha the whereabouts of Sita and Lakshman (4.31), and the use of the pedal that support the music above it. Here, touches of chromaticism can be heard; its use now tends to be reserved for the building-up of tension dictated by the story: as Surpanakha reveals to Rama for the
first time her brother’s plot the cor anglais and bass clarinet begin on A (growing out of the A in the low strings) and proceed slowly upward in an almost exclusively chromatic line.

Holst also achieves a kind of kinetic motionlessness through the use of alternating chords (4.32); this is an earlier example of an idiom that became a factor of his style which he would put to use with more sophistication many times in future works.

By the last scene of Sita—and certain inspired moments throughout—Holst is doing away with “the absurd conglomeration of trappings in the opera”, a somewhat harsh way of describing the earlier sections of the work, and his own “seriousness of purpose [is shining] through...” (Holst, I. 1986, p 17).

It has been suggested that the sparseness seen in much of Act III could have been due to Holst’s anxiety to finish the opera in time for submission for the Ricordi prize, and in this way discovered a musical language which suited his nature. While it is true that he hurried to finish Sita because of the competition deadline it is unlikely that he would consider undermining the quality of his work; quite the reverse, considering the fact that critical eyes would be studying it against the works of others. Also, other Holst compositions of roughly the same time (for which there were no deadlines for completion) show a similar style emerging, such as in the Six Songs op 15 of 1903, certain sections of The Mystic Trumpeter (1904), and A Song of the Night for violin and orchestra (1905) in which the instrumentation was often pared down and solo voices or instruments were occasionally unaccompanied.
Thematic organisation is not a strong point in *Sita* even though Holst has provided a certain number which are traceable, although sparse. A collection of the more significant themes found and their uses throughout are listed in 4.33, some of which will be recognisable in other examples in this chapter. There are a number of them that become identifiable as the work progresses, but they are difficult to pinpoint and used rather infrequently. This indicates that Holst was less concerned with developing his themes—or still lacking the technique with which to do so in a work of this magnitude—and far more intrigued by the drama itself, not fully realising that, ideally, he should have envisioned the drama through the use of themes. The whole would then have been greater than the sum of its parts, such as the cohesion he achieved not long after with *Sâvitri*. Certain themes do reappear, but there is a lack of sophistication in their use; they are not transformed to suit evolving dramatic surroundings, nor do they form part of the orchestra’s “commentary” as consistently as they do in the future operas.

His attempts to use a theme in order symbolise a particular character or situation are done somewhat inelegantly, such as Rama’s appearance at the beginning of Act III. The theme which he sings when the curtain rises has formed a substantial part of the prologue immediately preceding and is used almost constantly for a long span of time into the act demonstrating a kind of discomfort as to how to best use a theme in a dramatic context (see theme ‘r’ in the catalogue of themes 4.33). When action of a more vigorous nature resumes Holst tends to fall back on the comfort of rushing chromatic scales, or minimal accompaniment and other techniques with which one has become all too familiar in looking through the manuscript.
An issue of the work not touched upon particularly is that of overall harmonic planning, and herein lies another of Sita's weaknesses. For unlike future compositions Holst seems to have either had difficulty with the arrangement of the tonal structure, or was undecided as to what to do in a work of this scale. Upon first viewing, the score abounds with key signatures that seem not to have any deliberate pattern. Act II continues in this vein with many key areas touched upon momentarily. Sections of relative harmonic stability occur only when there is a kind of hiatus in the drama, for example in an aria such as Sita's "Hail the Sun's Uprising" which is in a clear G major. During the second act and through to the end of the opera key signatures disappear altogether and one gets the sense that Holst now wished to rely on his orchestral, contrapuntal and melodic skills to move the drama forward. Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that he had made an attempt at using key as a dramatic tool according to when and where specific ones are used. The signatures used do not restrict the passage to the keys which they indicate, yet the change of colour caused is what is important. Naturally, one can only judge this from the first and part of the second acts, so an overall accurate picture is not quite possible.

Sections of music having no key signature are reserved for prologues, Mother Earth, references to Earth (such as Rama's pledge to Mother Earth early in Act I), as well as places of relative stability with regard to the action. The melodic flow is not particularly chromatic. The appearance of six sharps/two sharps during the prologue heightens the effect of Mother Earth's prayer to Vishnu to send a saviour. There are other sections without key signature which are very chromatic; one finds these related to the presence of evil forces: the raksha army, the heroes' conflict with the enemy, Surpanakha's plea to her brother for revenge, the appearance of Ravana, and Ravana's
plan to kidnap Sita, to name but a few. The three main characters (excluding the evil ones) have their own key signatures by which they may be identified: Sita appears with three sharps, Rama with five sharps, and Lakshman with five flats (in a passage first sung by Rama as he sees his brother fall and believes him to be dead). Five flats also control the moment when Lakshman celebrates the coming of Sita and his vow to protect his brother and new sister.

The key of one flat—and a passage that has the definite feel of the major mode—underscores the three characters as they celebrate their new life together. One flat, but clearly in the minor, accompanies the evil general Maritcha who tells his army of demons the story of their leader’s battle with Indra. Sita is also associated with one sharp, and her important aria of Act II is in this key; it is also the key in which Rama first sings to Sita early in Act I, and the one in which she tries to persuade Lakshman to hunt for the fawn with the golden skin. As will be remembered from the synopsis, the golden fawn is part of the plot in the eventual capture of Sita (Act II), and therefore is connected to the presence of evil. Lakshman appears accompanied by a signature of three flats as he describes his sighting of the fawn and his attempt at hunting it down; it is in this way that the signature of three flats is linked with the idea of deception.

Holst also attempted tonal organisation on a larger scale in spite of his change of attitude toward the use and meaning of key signatures later in the opera. Several tonal centres emerge at significant points of the drama and can be seen to be related: Act I ends with D clearly as its focal point. The second act begins in F (the key in which the three protagonists first came together in Act I) then, after a somewhat rapid passage
through various keys Holst makes his way back to the central D, this time emphasising the minor mode as we are introduced to the general of Ravana’s army. The next significant key that we come to is that of G, when Sita sings her aria, and is joined by Rama in a duet. The key signatures end soon after this point, however as the opera draws to a close Mother Earth has reappeared to reclaim her daughter. As will be recalled, the deity is associated with no key signature and the ending, while not sharing much in the way of thematic material with the beginning except for one motive heard in the orchestra (refer to bars 3 and 4 of [a] in 4.33), implies an almost peaceful sense of the major mode and, indeed, the work ends on a chord of C. These tonal centres may be expressed thus:

Figure 1.

This is not a complete listing of the work’s keys; Holst’s changing ideas of musical organisation has made the tonal underpinning of the opera rather loose in construction, but it is interesting to see that, of the keys expressed in Figure 1, there is a distinct connection. G is related centrally to the outermost keys as the dominant of C, D as the dominant of G, and the inner vacillation between d minor and its relative F. The G centre seems to be especially important (Sita’s aria in celebration of the sunrise); it is the heart of the drama in Act II and the balance between G and the passages implying C at the extreme ends of the work could be likened to the daughter of the Earth paying homage to the deity of the Sky in the middle of the opera. So balance is achieved both in the drama and in the key areas which express that drama.
Taken as a whole, *Sita* suffers from Holst's love of the legend combined with his inexperience in dealing with a composition of such magnitude. Much of it is so concerned with narrative and action that most of the vocal lines have recitative-like qualities more often than discernible themes that are used to enhance the action or the nature of the characters. When themes are used and reappear for emphasis it is done in a somewhat rudimentary manner, as if the whole enterprise were a kind of trial run for the far more sophisticated *Sâvitri*, and, as Holst's personal history shows, that may have been the case.

On the other hand, Holst exerted much forethought and effort into the onstage drama for there is a tremendous number of very specific stage directions for the solo singers and choruses. In setting his libretto to music most of the vocal lines were fashioned so that the rhythm would fit the words, hence the feeling of recitative more often than that of themes or sections that could fit the description of arias (such as Sita's “Behold the Sun’s Uprising” from Act II). In other words, musical cohesion was somewhat subservient to the dramatic elements of the story.

The situation of discussing a work that is not well-known is vital, and care must be taken in order to avoid errors. For instance in an admirable series of articles in *Tempo* Magazine by Raymond Head on Holst and India one finds possibly the most thorough description and discussion of *Sita*. But there are a few relatively minor errors such as the misspellings of characters’ names: Lakshman (known as Lakshmana in the original text) is spelled Lakshmena, and Ravana’s sister Surpanadhya has mutated into Superanakha). There are a couple of other problems with the description of the plot.
Head states that “Act Two...opens with a battle between Ravana and Indra, who is defeated. Returning to his kingdom of Lanka, Ravana turns his attention to capturing Rama and Sita” (Head, 1986, p 6). This implies that Indra is a character in the opera; however this is not the case. In actuality the confrontation between Ravana and Indra is told as a story by one of Ravana’s chiefs to his army as a great battle which happened in the past, after which Ravana appears on the scene prepared to carry out the kidnap of Sita. Also, Ravana does not turn two of his men into golden fawns; only one becomes a golden fawn which Sita desires to have. Both Rama and Lakshman then leave to hunt the fawn, leaving her alone in their hut, a prey to Ravana who will appear in disguise and kidnap her.

Another (albeit minor) point can be found in Imogen Holst’s book on her father’s music wherein she insists on referring to the “voice of the Earth” when discussing the hidden chorus (Holst 1985, p 17). A glance in the score on the title page—and in the Prologue and the Epilogue when this chorus is singing—shows that Holst only ever referred to them as the Voices of the Earth.7

Dismissive commentary (which will be reproduced shortly) does not inspire the reader to investigate the subject of Sita further. But Holstians such as Raymond Head point out various crucial elements of importance with regard to Sita, in particular, aspects of Holst’s individual style that are beginning to come to the fore in this work.

Ironically, Holst’s greatest champion was also one of his greatest detractors: Imogen Holst did not do much to encourage study of Sita. Her initial discussion of it in the

7 This of course could simply be a printing error.
first edition of *The Music of Gustav Holst* was filled with derisive and sarcastic commentary. The picture she drew of *Sita* was that it was a good exercise for a young composer's experience but apart from that it did not merit much attention. She does, however, give it some credit:

But in spite of all its extravagance it is possible to recognize his own music striving to be heard: in a seven-four tune in a Phrygian scale with a sharpened sixth, in the dramatic repetition of the distant hammering of the bridge-builders, which is one of the few moments in the whole opera that shows any real grasp of the possibilities of writing for the stage, and in the struggle between the forces of good and evil...And there is an anticipation of the mood of *Sāvitrī* in the floating sixths of the hidden chorus of sopranos and altos representing the voice [sic] of the Earth...It is in such moments as these that Holst’s seriousness of purpose shines through the absurd conglomeration of trappings in the opera, holding fast to the greatness of the underlying idea that a god must become man before he can save the world from evil.

Holst, I., 1986, pp16-17

Imogen Holst describes the opera as having been planned on a colossal scale, which is a suitable description although it bears negative connotations. Of Sita’s entrance she writes “When the heroine appears and catches a first glimpse of the man who is destined to be her husband, she flings back her shoulders and greets him by name on a high-held fortissimo A over a tremolo crescendo from the full orchestra” (Holst, I. 1986, p 16). This is her visualization of the scene; there are no stage directions that refer to the flinging back of shoulders. She also writes of the “long-enduring soloists” who have to “compete with an enormous orchestra in their efforts to provide the volume of tone demanded by the composer” (Holst, I. 1986, p 16). This cannot be a surprise; the work is certainly for full orchestra, but it is not excessively orchestrated. The balance between singers and orchestral forces is difficult, but all singers performing a full-length opera consisting of several acts require physical and musical endurance.
Jon C. Mitchell has referred to *Sita* as “the huge wasted effort” (Mitchell 2001, p 82). It is a great pity that a work of this magnitude may not have been a success in the material sense; there are those who can dismiss it so readily and not recognize the vital role it played in the evolution of Holst’s style. Without *Sita* and its inherent challenges and frustrations Holst could not have made the transitions that are so obvious in this work, through the *Vedic Hymns* of 1907 and culminating in the masterpiece of *Sâvitri* of 1909. There is a great deal in *Sita* that is of merit and which he eventually developed; this hardly fits the description of a wasted effort.

*Sita* is known only to a relatively small minority (and in many cases only by its title). The fact that it remains unpublished to this day may account for lack of interest in its discussion and the reliance on sources already in existence for inadequate information regarding it. Its role for Holst as a catalyst for stylistic change has already been mentioned and will also be demonstrated later in this chapter, but what about its inherent value as an opera in its own right?

Despite a certain naïvete in his approach due to youth and lack of previous experience, *Sita* nevertheless is a work of value among the operatic repertoire of the time. It is bold in concept—Holst had never attempted anything on this grand scale before. Although *Sita* did not win the Ricordi prize, Holst was satisfied that he was capable of compositions of this magnitude. The work is a good example of the effect of Wagnerian style on a later generation even though Holst rejected this path, choosing instead to develop some of the characteristics that were already making themselves known.
Contemporary operas in England were also composed on a similar grand scale as *Sita*; composers such as Stanford, Delius, Boughton and Bantock produced works consisting of anywhere from two to even five acts. As Holst was beginning to move toward the more intimate chamber opera (beginning with the one-act *Sāvitrī* and continuing into his late period) composers of English opera tended to remain faithful to the larger format. *Sita* is surely unique in that the composer translated the text from classic literature in an ancient language first, and from there fashioned a libretto. Other composers also found inspiration in classic literature, but mostly sources already in English. A number were based on realistic plots, such as those of Stanford; Delius, in a more impressionistic vein, produced tragic opera which again are on the realistic side. Boughton’s *The Immortal Hour* (1916) and Bantock’s *The Seal Woman* (1924) are fantasies closer in spirit to *Sita*, all being inspired by mythological themes. *Sita* has its place alongside many of its best contemporaries, but retains its unique characteristics.

Holst was rapidly evolving as a dramatist through *Sita*; his use of somewhat archaic language suited the interpretation of classic epic poetry and showed more finesse than in his previous ventures:

```
Each thing that liveth
liveth in me
I am the beast and bird
I am the creeping thing
I am the tree and flower
the leaf and the grass blade.
Mighty Vishnu,
Thou art our guardian.
Save us from one who knoweth no mercy,
who knoweth no law,
Chief of the Rakshas!
```

Prayer of Mother Earth, *Sita*, Prologue
The stilted and unnatural effect is hardly present as it is in, for example, *The Youth's Choice*, and the antiquated wording of the text was now combined with a kind of directness that became fundamentally important to Holst's artistic philosophy.

*Sita* also demonstrates its value as a work in which Holst took original ideas from earlier projects and developed them to a higher level of perfection, such as the specific use of lighting for reinforcing important dramatic moments. A fine sense of drama is achieved through the lighting specifications, the use of hidden voices which became a trademark Holstian technique in works other than opera, as well as the very detailed stage directions and the depiction of the building of the bridge over the river in the third act, wherein it is specified that hammers and anvils be used as part of the orchestra.

By 1906 then, despite the dissatisfaction with the opera's progress and the certainty that he was going in the wrong direction much of the time, Holst achieved upheavals in style that made *Sita* the work that eventually opened the way for *Sâvitri*, completed in 1909, the stark contrast of which could not be greater. He learned to say more by using less and this was used to marvellous effect as well in the part songs and the orchestral music.

In early portions of *Sita* (most frequently in moments from Act I) chromatic language was applied in a somewhat indiscriminate manner for the purpose of dramatic effect, almost as if Holst felt that the music had to overcompensate in some way, and had to carry the plot. When he allowed the plot to carry the music, he found he could free himself to express more by using less, for the music no longer had to portray all the
emotions and action present in the scene. The chromatic lines were exploited more deliberately to enhance the action, and eventually there is a more careful and sparing use of orchestral forces. Chords that move and resolve by step-wise motion are employed with more understanding and for support of the vocal lines. *Sita* was a magnificent opportunity for the young composer to find his mature voice through dedicated self-application.

However, due to its inconsistency of style, *Sita* falls short of being a masterpiece of musical design and by that token is not a representative example of an English opera. The very nature of its metamorphosis over the six years makes it stylistically rather less compact. This is not the Holst of more minimal material resulting in maximum expression. Much is done on a grand scale and, as we have seen, this was fundamentally contrary to his nature, causing him great discomfort and frustration. He began to deal with this issue to a certain extent with limited success in the final act.

*Sita* does, however, excel in its intricate plot of fascinating origin. The *Ramayana* is an undisputed literary classic; whether it was a realistic choice for a stage work is another matter. As was stated earlier, the practicalities of performance were not in the forefront of Holst’s thinking while working on this project. An inner creative need drove the young composer to express in music a text that he greatly admired. Aside from the alterations and omissions to the original story that were obviously needed

---

8 It is, hopefully, needless to say that the source of his libretto does not in any way diminish the opera’s “Englishness”. Contemporary operas had been inspired by literature or folk tales ranging from the Cotswolds (*Hugh the Drove*) to the Creole (*Koanga*) to Hans Christian Andersen (*The Traveling Companion*), to name but a few.
(such as a god having seven heads, an army of monkeys and an army of bears) Holst brought a more human element into what remained a mythological tale.

His sensitivity to the story and the sweeping nature of the major themes created to depict the action revealed him to be a dramatist and a lyricist—two aspects fundamental to the nature of an opera composer. In terms of the drama, the story moves along with a convincing sense of pacing (with the possible exception of the scene between Rama and Sita when they first meet, which tends to suspend the dramatic momentum somewhat, but is possibly good for establishing the natures of the two main characters). This aspect of the pacing of a drama will be demonstrated in Sāvitrī and the success with which it is done. Musically, Sita is an uncomfortable blend of “numbers” opera and music drama: passages that are clearly recitative in manner move the rather sophisticated plot forward (therefore there is a great deal of recitative which may contribute to the “less compact” construction mentioned above) but the arias and ensembles are presented with the dramatist’s keen eye for effect, and the beauty of their themes make them the essential motifs which do their best to hold the three acts together. Clever writing is seen in the ensembles, wherein, if the same text is sung by all characters involved, the music breaks up into a round to give a more contrapuntal effect⁹, and if the text is different, singers are given the task of combining their separate parts after having presented them singly so that the nature of the dramatic moment is not obscured. It calls to mind Sullivan’s “counterpoint of characters” which used the same model. This is a superb example of the way in which Holst did not discard an admired method of composition after having moved into a

---

⁹ By the end of Act II one does become aware that Holst is beginning to use this “technique” rather frequently in ensembles, and it is in danger of becoming somewhat predictable despite its effective sound.
new style, but his absorption of elements of diverse sources which would together form his unique musical character.\textsuperscript{10}

Considering \textit{Sita} a century after its creation one may wonder whether it would be convincing if performed today. This naturally raises the issue of the elements which constitute a successful opera. Is the success to be found in the pages of the score—the arrangement of the musical material itself, such as deftly handled themes, overall organisation of the harmonic structure, etc—or must the work wait to be performed before it can be judged? Because it relies so intrinsically on the visible drama much of its worth must lie with its effectiveness on stage; in this \textit{Sita} would make a notable impression. However, weaknesses in underlying structure can be felt, even to those who would be unable to explain their dissatisfaction. Meandering musical lines and possibly predictable orchestral effects, among other elements, would make a negative impression just as the bold staging would do the opposite. Hence, \textit{Sita} is a questionable addition to the modern opera repertoire. However, a valuable contribution could be made to the enrichment of the understanding of Holst’s music (and in particular his development) if a compact disc of the entire work were recorded, as well as a DVD that could show how it might look staged—both valuable additions to a library to be available for interest.

Ironically, \textit{Sita}’s fundamental worth stems from the elements that are factors of its intrinsic limitations; the changes that one hears taking place with regard to the musical treatment portend future developments in Holst’s own style, and would one day see the next generation of composers (such as Britten and Tippett) naming Holst

\textsuperscript{10} Refer to discussion on Sullivan in chapter one.
as an influence in their operatic writing. The transitional nature of *Sita* marks the point at which Holst’s past and the future concur.

By the time *Sita* was completed Holst had reached another plateau and was now ready to move on to his next undertaking, again inspired by his Sanskrit studies, the set of songs known as *The Vedic Hymns*. Although composed in the intimate arrangement of solo voice and piano Holst was nevertheless able to transfer his recently evolved understanding of the roles of text and music, which he had achieved over six, or seven years of frustrating hard work on *Sita* to the three exquisite groups of songs of opus 24.

[Addendum: Please refer to Appendix IV for examples of facsimiles from *Sita* op 23.]
5. *Vedic Hymns* op 24: The Path to *Sāvitrī*

It is part of the process in the development of a composer’s language that he or she should draw inspiration from a particular source at a particular time, or from various diverse sources that come together in an individual way. Gustav Holst was a prime example of one in whom seemingly unrelated concepts combined in a unique manner, and he allowed himself to be inspired by both musical and non-musical sources as long as they suggested music to his creative mind.

Part of the fascination of Holst’s music lies in tracing the development of his personal musical language and the struggle to find his own sound. Early powerful influences held sway over him during his time as a student at the Royal College of Music and the late Romantic sound had pervaded his music for many of his formative years as a composer.

By the time the next opera, *Sāvitrī* op 25, was begun in 1908, Holst’s concept of musical design had clearly been thoroughly reconsidered. It was the songs of opus 24, the *Vedic Hymns* for solo voice and piano of 1907-08, which bridged this chasm. The source for the *Vedic Hymns* was the *Rig Veda*; it was the basis for an early song entitled *Invocation to the Dawn* (the first of the *Six Songs* op 15 from 1902) and was also the source of texts used later in the *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* op 26. The *Vedic Hymns* for solo voice and piano are further examples of the development of Holst’s mature style both in terms of linear motion and of harmonic underpinning. They are interesting as studies in their own right, and their significance is revealed in their context as works that followed the completion of *Sīta*. The language of the *Vedic*
Hymns is more accessible if one understands the stylistic journey taken by his opera. From Sita Holst learned that his success as a musical dramatist came from the realisation that the text will carry the music, and his discovery of folk song, which had occurred at roughly the same time, affected his Sanskrit settings as well. Songs, as he had once thought, were not a “peg” of words on which you hang a tune, but were living embodiments of the language wherein the words and music were interdependent. In other words, his arrangements of folk songs and the work on Sita combined to make the Vedic Hymns possible. The sound of the minimally used accompaniment (in some songs), its occasional absence and the often freely curving vocal line that defies metre are among the character traits that are now recognisable as the style of Holst during the early years of the twentieth century.

Altogether Holst composed fourteen settings from the Rig Veda for solo voice and piano, nine of which were finally arranged into three groups of three. They were published in 1920. In these songs Holst experimented with bold combinations of harmonies and the creation of chords formed by linear chromatic motion, the purpose for which becomes clear as each song progresses. Not all are governed by a key signature, and hints of pitch collections other than diatonic scales appear sporadically. Accompaniment is used economically—in some cases very sparsely—thereby giving it more impact in an inverse way. The compositional approach to each song is dictated by the text at hand, for instance by its mood, or the scansion (which in turn controls the rhythmic line and therefore the metre); one can sense Holst the dramatist at work.

---

1 For a detailed outline of Holst’s original plans for the opus 24 songs see Raymond Head, Holst and India (II), Tempo no. 160 (1987), p 29 footnote; also Imogen Holst, Thematic Catalogue of Holst’s Music, 1974, p 80.
It is precisely characteristics such as these that reappeared on a larger scale in *Savitri* the following year.

The first song, *Ushas (Dawn)*, is in B flat; however it opens with a curious chord based on F, the remainder of which is an A major triad. The piano then continues with a D minor arpeggio only to end with the same chord. When the voice enters in bar 5 the music arrives in the key of B flat. The opening chord can be seen in a dual role: first, as dominant (A, C sharp, E) to the subsequent D minor harmony, and the F and A as dominant of the key of B flat (5.1). The lowest note of each left hand piano chord is F and, regardless of the chords that accompany the first section of this tripartite song, F is the lowest note, functioning as the long-term dominant pedal of B flat.

In the second section of *Ushas* the key has changed to D major, the link between B flat and D majors having been expressed by the opening chord (which contained the dominants of both keys) (5.2). Due to this chord the two key areas featured in the song are thereby related. The vocal line uses the same theme that was heard in the first section. This middle section now involves A in the lowest voice as the new dominant pedal. Holst uses his characteristic linear motion in the piano’s lowest notes to move back to the dominant pedal of F, that is, from A through B to C sharp and stepping back to C at b 29 (the dominant pedal of F).

The effortless transition from D back to B flat is achieved by the sophisticated use of enharmonic writing. Between the sections lies a phrase in sharps that, if translated into its counterpart in flats, becomes D flat major. The vocal phrase ends on A sharp
which, heard as B, becomes the seventh of the dominant seventh of F major. The resolution to F in the bass then becomes the dominant pedal for the returning key of B flat. On a linear level the two bars immediately preceding the return of Tempo I show Holst’s command of the subtle movement of line: in the left hand accompaniment B flat-F-A flat shifts to F-A-C sharp (which formed part of the opening chord). This then resolves to B flat when C sharp resolves to D (the third of the tonic chord) and F/A supports the dominant:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
A \text{ flat} \rightarrow A \text{ natural} \rightarrow (V) \\
F \rightarrow (F) \rightarrow (V) \\
B \text{ flat} \rightarrow \\
C \text{ sharp} \rightarrow (D) \quad \text{(third of I)}
\end{array}
\]

A change in key signature back to the key of B flat allows the pedal to move to C sharp, which functions as the dominant of F. Once again F is established as the pedal note. When the final section begins (through the reappearance of the opening chord, which reasserts its harmonic implications) the main theme remains while the accompaniment now establishes the tonality with a tonic rather than a dominant pedal (5.3). The approach to the return of the opening chord and to the strong establishment of the tonic features the highest point of the vocal line: a high and sustained F at the words “The Sun draws nigh.”

The change of colour brought about by harmony is used to its full extent in these songs; this is an understated manner of expressing the text and Holst uses it to great effect. The polarity between “dark” and “light” harmonic colours is reflected in the
text, such as in the middle section of this song. The “brighter” key of D major replaces B flat as the text tells us of the “child of heav’n arrayed in shining garments”.

While the first song explored the polarity and similarity between two seemingly unrelated keys, the second, Varuna I (Sky), is anchored upon the pitch C, and demonstrates the superb use of a pedal point as a dramatic technique, one which we saw Holst beginning to use in Sita. This song is an extraordinary example of a work of maximum effect achieved with minimum material (arguably one of the finest songs of the group). It is also illustrative of the kind of writing for which Holst was striving, or, as Imogen Holst puts it, “In Varuna (Sky) he suddenly emerges into the clear light of his most mature thought. Bare fourths and fifths over a held pedal intersperse the silences, conveying a static aloofness...Varuna shows that he was learning to free his harmonies from their former associations...” (Holst, I., 1986, p 17-18) (5.4). While harmonic techniques were changing in Sita, Holst never quite reached the point at which he felt comfortable enough to abandon chordal writing and experiment with the aforementioned bare fourths and fifths. The static nature of the sustained note is balanced by motion in the piano chords and in the vocal part, which is meant to be sung in an improvisational manner. This is a device used to great effect in moments of poignancy in Sāvitrī. There are phrases in Varuna in which Holst leaves out the accompaniment entirely in order to focus attention on the vocal line. In terms of song structure it is strophic in that the main melody is heard with three different verses; it is then followed by a codetta which is formed from two melodic fragments taken from the body of the song. This codetta consists of five bars initiated by the now familiar C pedal in the piano, but the vocal part begins on E (a reflection of the F flat that had permeated the previous phrases), a feature that has not happened yet in this song,
heralding a special moment in the text. In fact, this is the moment of the appearance of
the deity to whom the supplicant has been praying throughout the song—"He doth
appear! My cry is answered!" The pitch E is important here in that the vocal line can
easily resolve to it at the end, creating the effect of a cadence; the voice coming to rest
above the C-G chord in the accompaniment. At the word "answered" the pitches sung
are G and E. The piano echoes this drop of a third, thus lowering the chordal
accompaniment by a third (5.5), which results in the only appearance of the pitch A.
"Varuna is always invoked as the god who, knowing all the transgressions of men, is
capable of everlasting forgiveness" (Head, 1987, p 30); the appearance of a deity who
grants forgiveness could very easily be treated musically with much pomp and
celebration. In fact Holst has chosen to do the opposite (despite the exclamation
marks in the text) making it the most subdued moment of the song. The singer is
instructed to sing sotto voce, and this is the only phrase in the song that is marked
pianissimo. Curiously, this is the climax of the song, and it is a brilliant and
unexpected treatment of the text. The power of the moment is enhanced by its
subdued and reverent quality that would be lost if treated in any other way. Later in
Sita moments of great intensity were sometimes sung without accompaniment, but the
element of "bawling" was still present. The ending of Varuna looks ahead to Sāavitri
where more intimate expression was treated in a similar manner.

The setting of the third song, Maruts (Stormclouds), is of a similar nature to the
previous one in that it is again strophic, and the accompaniment sustains its rhythmic
pattern throughout. However, its drama is of a drastically different kind. The song is
characterized by an energetic accompaniment depicting Indra’s attendant army of
clouds clashing in battle, and the galloping piano figures clearly portray the
“Tramping of horses, Shouting of riders” as they “fill the sky” (5.6a). The piano part maintains its momentum literally without rest, and friction is created by dissonant intervals heard melodically in the same hand (such as semitones and tritones) or the fast moving harmony between the hands. It is interesting to compare this song with an unpublished earlier song *The Day of the Lord* (the exact composition date of which is unknown) that shares very similar rhythmic and melodic characteristics (5.6b).

As the ending approaches the piano echoes the words “Then shall our songs, like clouds expanding” by literally expanding the right- and left-hand parts; they move ever farther away from each other by means of Holst’s favoured technique of stepwise motion. *Maruts* is not an exercise in minimal writing for the piano using sparse harmonies, as are so many of the songs in this cycle, but is an example of highly effective use of accompaniment as a dramatic tool. *Ushas* and *Varuna I* were both examples of prayer—the first in praise, the second in penitence. Holst used the method of “anchoring” harmonies to a pedal to preserve in the songs a kind of stillness. *Maruts* is also a prayer, but laden with fear, and the violence is depicted by the unstable nature of the harmony, as well as the rhythm.

In the original set of 1907 Holst intended that there be a fourth song in the first group called *Ratri* (Night); he withdrew this song sometime between 1918 and 1920, just before the Op 24 songs were published. None of the sources that mention this song suggest any clear reason for its withdrawal. Head’s view that this was possibly due to its brevity (Head, 1987, p 29 footnote) is unconvincing. Although the song fits on to one page there are four verses. Therefore it would actually be four times as long in

---

2 *Ratri* has been reprinted in Raymond Head’s 1987 article “Holst and India (II)” in *Tempo*, no. 160, p 37.
terms of the number of pages, and forty-two bars in length when performed. The song
Varuna I is only two pages and thirty-seven bars in length, therefore the brevity of a
song was evidently a superficial issue when it came to the decision whether to keep or
discard a song. A more likely reason would have been Holst’s dissatisfaction with
what the song achieved as far as his emerging style is concerned; in his mind it failed
in some way. The song is melodically quite simplistic in its strophic design
(somewhat like Varuna I), but it may be that he found he could do nothing more with
it, and any other possibilities regarding the accompaniment were unsatisfactory. No
other versions by Holst of this song exist (even in fragmentary sketches) with which
one could compare the treatment of the verses.

Ratri shares with Ushas the juxtaposition of key areas. However, in Ratri the areas of
tonality are difficult to pin down. The music possibly indicates C before the voice
enters, after which the appearance of B flat in the piano part challenges this notion.
Holst makes use again here of a pedal as well as the so-called “trudging” bass line
(5.7); the latter was not used in Holst’s hallmark fashion in Sita as was the former but
both became part of his stylistic idiom in works of different genres. When C occurs as
the tonic in the vocal line in the eighth bar it is not the tonic in the accompaniment but
rather the seventh of the dominant seventh of G major. The voice then finishes its part
clearly in G (that is, preceded by its leading-note F sharp) but the accompaniment
uses G as the dominant seventh of C major, causing a somewhat unsubtle cross-
relation between the vocal line and the following chord in the upper piano part. The
only clear sense of the tonality of the song is attained at its final cadence; the work is
centred on C but never clearly arrives until the perfect cadence in the last bar, which suggests II-V (with raised fifth)-I.³

The fourth (published) song, known as the first song of the Second Group, is *Indra* (*God of Storm and Battle*) in which Holst is more interested in sections governed by discernible key areas. The accompaniment is based on one general rhythmic idea, but his main interest here is the pattern of keys and the form generated by it (5.8). The key of C is established from the outset; even so, the entrance of the voice on the tonic is not accompanied by the tonic chord, but by the subdominant. As with other songs of this group, we are well into the song before a cadence is reached, in this case the seventeenth bar. At *poco piú mosso* there is momentarily a sudden shift to the relative minor, A minor; its leading-note G is then enharmonically rewritten as A flat and the phrase shifts into D flat major. C major has thus moved up by semitone to the new key area. The same pattern continues as the next phrase brings B flat minor, whose leading-note becomes the dominant of D major—another motion upward by semitone to a new key area. A move upward in the following phrase takes the music into E flat without the benefit of D major's relative minor, but this break in the pattern coincides with the beginning of the *stringendo* section that will push the music almost erratically (in terms of tempo and key) until coming to rest at Tempo I in D flat. The opening theme returns in this new key and in a different mood, after which C major is reasserted *più lento* and the song is brought to a rousing conclusion.

³ One is reminded here of the influential chord from *Ushas* (*Dawn*) which also featured the dominant with a raised fifth degree (F-A-C sharp resolving to B flat-D-F).
The return of the opening theme in D flat is significant in that Holst has built the musical structure by semitonal upward motion on the surface and also on a larger scale by taking the song from C to D flat and back to C. He has abandoned strophic song form as such and has arranged the material in a more ternary fashion overall. The departure from the opening section in C occurs with the arrival of A minor. The ensuing motion through the different key areas in the symmetrical pattern develops the central portion of the song, and the break with the pattern and the accompanying stringendo pushes the music toward the reappearance of the opening theme in D flat. C major is re-established at the end with the main theme in the home key accompanied now by a tonic pedal—a trait favoured more and more by the composer. The key scheme is one that Holst uses quite often: the linking of keys that are apparently unrelated by enharmonic re-spelling of a certain pitch or simply by shifting one or more parts by semitone. He achieves sudden and frequent changes in musical colour effortlessly by this method.

The dramatic possibilities provided by the various deities form the cornerstone of the structure of these songs, and, according to Raymond Head, Holst was already thinking operatically when dealing with Indra: “it is worth mentioning that there is a musical link between all the settings, particularly strongly between the solo hymn op. 24 no. 4 and the choral hymn, 1st Group op. 26, no. 1; but also 4th Group op. 26 no. 4, leading us to speculate that Holst saw this god in operatic terms as a developing character, the opening phrase of each...acting as a leitmotif in different contexts” (Head, 1987, p 29). Imogen Holst had her own misgivings about the fourth song of op 24, describing it as having an “air of false assertion” and a “second-hand sort of nobility”
(Holst, I., 1986, p 18), but she did not develop her statement. Also, without specific examples it is difficult to interpret her somewhat mystifying comment that

Where the words of the hymns expressed his own philosophy, the sheer strength of his conviction compelled him to find an adequate outline for the rise and fall of his phrases. But in working out the problems of harmony he was hampered by his lack of technique.

Holst, I., 1986, p 18

Holst’s quest to arrange musical material in ways that looked beyond the diatonic scale is explored in *Varuna II (The Waters)*. Holst presents Varuna in different aspects as depicted in the *Rig Veda*. Varuna represents moral order; he controls the sky as well as reigning over rivers, streams and even the sea (Head, 1987, p 30). Hence the cycle of songs contains a hymn to Varuna in both aspects of Sky and, now, Water. Both songs’ texts concern a prayer for forgiveness and protection; both are centred on the pitch C. In this song the vocal line of the first section allows the accompaniment to shift easily to harmonies that are unexpected and unrelated to C major by way of step-wise motion in whole tones (5.9) as well as enharmonic shifts, such as F flat assuming the role of E so that the melody can move fluently from A flat to C major. At the words “tossed by winds” the piano gives effect to the text, and the ensuing rapid arpeggio figuration (specifically, a half-diminished seventh chord) precludes any association with a specific key area. The middle section features more unexpected key areas and chords that require resolution in the classical sense but do so in the “wrong” key, such as the arpeggio forming the dominant seventh of E resolving instead to E flat (5.10). Holst uses harmonic tension and other musical tools to paint the scene provided by the text. The first *forte* marking along with *più mosso* heralds a sudden cry to “Mighty God!” The panic of the overwhelming waters that are “swiftly rising” finds its counterpart in the rising vocal line. All elements together provide the
drama in this section; the climax of the piece is reached with the singer’s highest note, and an unresolved diminished seventh chord that is followed by complete silence (5.11). The opening section returns; the vocal line is a now a variation that works contrapuntally against the accompaniment which is virtually identical to that heard at the beginning. The work comes to an end quietly as it had begun, and in the home key. It is interesting to note that the first hymn to Varuna ended with a complete chord on C in root position, the sinner’s transgressions having been forgiven; in other words there is resolution in the text and in the music. In *Varuna II* the final words are the plea that has been sung throughout and the final musical statement is ambiguous—a C triad without its root. In this case both the music and the fate of the supplicant are unresolved. The accompaniment throughout is kept to a minimum, particularly in the outer sections, reserving its dramatic power for the middle section. Holst used silence and unaccompanied voice (such as in *Varuna I*) for dramatic effect in *Sita* and it became a vital element of *Sā vitri*.

As with *Maruts*, the third song of the set, the sixth, *Song of the Frogs*, presents less in the way of harmonic innovation; the piano accompaniment for both is rhythmically very active. *Song of the Frogs* does, however, demonstrate Holst’s fascination with irregular metres as well as with modal harmony and melodic construction, in this case the Aeolian mode in E with the occasional appearance of F natural, which seems to add a touch of humour through chromatic steps and the tritone. The refrain provides the climax of the use of chromaticism and gives the song its almost awkward texture (5.12).
The first song of the Third Group (the seventh song) is another example of Holst's philosophy of simplicity and directness of expression. Vac was the goddess of speech and is referred to in only two hymns in the Rig Veda. Holst was interested in the second setting which deals with speech in the sense of "unity of creation that is sustained by the Sacred Word, the first creation" as opposed to speech as a medium for prayer (Head, 1987, p 34). Vac (Speech) is in 5/4 time. In his second article on Holst and India Raymond Head states that he finds "the melody rather awkward in its 5/4 time. But the long-held chords in the piano and noble melody in E flat do lend a regal air to the opening words..." (Head, 1987, p 34). This is a curious statement for there is no feeling of pulse in the 5/4 metre, as if there were no bar lines in this song, and the afore-mentioned long-held chords contribute to this effect (5.13). Holst depicts 'Speech' with music that is in a parlando style even though this is not indicated in the score. The bar in 7/4 at Tempo I near the end further obscures any sense of pulse. Holst is clearly allowing the inflections of the text to dictate the rhythm of the song. The rather static chordal accompaniment allows the song its rhythmic freedom, whereas a more active role of the piano would have imposed an unwanted sense of metre. The song is reminiscent of the classical recitative style in which the accompaniment punctuates the freer declamation of the voice (5.14).

As in Varuna I, Vac has two verses followed by a codetta that is based on the thematic material of the verses. There is variation in the second verse: four extra bars are inserted for the sake of accommodating the text, and an interesting change in the descending line from E flat, D, C, B flat, A to E flat, D flat, C flat, B flat, A allowing a change in the harmonic underpinning from the subdominant to the flattened submediant (5.15). Besides allowing for the line to be heard against flattened
submediant harmony (hitherto unheard in this song), it also indicates future changes
to the vocal line in the codetta that include the pitches G flat, C flat and D flat. The
repetition of the melody gives the song the impression of a chant, and because the
vocal line repeats, it is the harmony of the accompaniment that deserves a closer look.
Again Holst is experimenting with possible changes of colour, in that different
harmony is used for the corresponding passages in the vocal line—progressions that
are unorthodox by classical (i.e. common practice) standards, such as in example
5.15. Pedal notes and pedal chords abound and the accompaniment is kept to the bare
minimum, just enough to serve its purpose. Strong tonic harmony occurs only at
certain points: at the beginning to establish the home key of E flat, as a pedal note in
the middle of the work, at the beginning of the codetta to re-establish the home key,
and at the final (and rather obvious) perfect cadence.

Creation, the penultimate song, is obviously the work in this cycle that bears striking
resemblance to the opening of Śāvitrī in concept. The song begins with the bold effect
of two verses of unaccompanied voice, the text of which describes the “nothingness”
of the universe before creation. Unlike some of the songs in this cycle it is the
horizontal line that is paramount here as opposed to the exercise in harmonic
colouring. The linear structure is characterised mainly by step-wise motion (often
chromatic) within the span of hardly more than one octave. The central pitch is G, the
pitch upon which the work begins and ends, but in this opening section G is
dependant on F sharp in that it tends to resolve to it, giving the sense of a lack of
resolution until the end of the verse when G is reached. The first twelve bars also
feature the curve of the diminished fifth (or augmented fourth, depending on the
enharmonic spelling), an interval that has an important role to play harmonically as well as motivically, as in Sā vitri (5.16).

It is important to note that the opening of the opera Sā vitri, begun the year after the completion of this song cycle, was conceived with a very similar linear style in mind. It can certainly be argued that the opera’s opening music was motivated by this eighth song, possibly due to the similarity in the content of the texts with their connection to Death.

The piano is heard for the first time, simultaneously conspicuous and unobtrusive, as the text finally makes reference to a Being: “Then there was One! One alone! Calm and self-existing: Beyond and apart was naught.” The passage quoted here is sung beginning on the pitch C sharp, resolving to C natural, and it is C that the piano plays simultaneously with the voice. Due to the piano doubling the voice, the pitch C is reinforced as the structural pitch, rather than C sharp. There is now the interval of a perfect fifth that holds the song together. The pitches used in the twelve unaccompanied bars are significant for they provide material from which future musical fragments will be constructed.

Unlike the molto adagio marking of the first section the new section that now includes the piano is marked agitato and this reflects the sudden change in what is happening in the poet’s image of the creation of the universe: “Then up rose Desire, Fierce glowing Desire.” Holst represents this sudden appearance of “fierce glowing desire” in the piano’s part with agitated rapid ascending and descending arpeggios. These latter are constructed from the pitches from which the solo line was formed. It is here
that the voice returns to the opening motive at its original pitch but acquires a new character owing to its sonic background and change of tempo.

At this point it may be interesting to investigate the possible source of the scale used in this song. Edmund Rubbra has claimed that the Hindu influence on Holst was such that he even made use of Indian ragas to facilitate freedom from the control of Western scales. Rubbra stated that Holst’s “instinctive inclination was towards Hindu scales” (Rubbra, 1947, p 17). There is, as yet, no evidence in any sources on Holst’s music or compositional process that suggest or demonstrate a conscious use of Hindu ragas. In fact, Holst persisted in making clear the point that he never tried to imitate Indian music; the stories and the mythological concepts were what interested him, but he was intent on personal expression when setting the texts to music.

Rubbra discovered that an unusual scale in one of Holst’s Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda happened to correspond to the Hindu raga called Gauri. His enthusiasm at what he thought was a possible discovery of Holst’s way of thinking coloured his perception of facts as, for example, when he talks of a raga that “roughly corresponds” with the harmonic minor scale. He gives several more examples that describe certain passages in Holst’s compositions that use particular ragas but that are modified in some way. A specific scale that is altered simply becomes a different scale, and it is more likely coincidence that some passages roughly corresponded to particular ragas.

There is no question that Holst was trying to free himself from the sound and influence of the diatonic; the scale from which Creation’s opening is formed does not
replicate a raga and is most likely the composer's own, suggested by the theme (5.17). In fact it was probably not thought of as a scale as such but as a collection of pitches that the composer felt expressed the text to his satisfaction.

The vocal line takes on the character of a recitative in the second section as the opening theme appears in the piano. Another noticeable change is the marking cresc. ed accel. poco a poco, but it is a change in the harmony that denotes a new section, namely the first appearance of the pitches D and F natural, giving an effect similar to that of a change of key. A highly important aspect of what has been referred to as the second section is the fact that, as the vocal line turns to recitative, it is the piano that takes up the theme (5.18). This is quite unique among the songs in this cycle; other piano parts have supported and/or doubled the vocal part but they have not carried the theme on their own while the voice moves freely against it. This is constantly found in Sāvitrī wherein voices introduce important motifs, which are then adopted by the orchestra and heard at the appropriate dramatic moments, presented only by the orchestra. Arpeggios and upward-treading basses still abound depicting the text which describes "The source of life. Begetting mighty forces. All heaved in restless motion". The climax of the song and the high point for the voice is in D flat; as in Indra the central C moves upward by semitone to D flat and eventually returns. C returns as a pedal note much as it did at its first appearance in this song (reminding one of Varuna I), and the pitch C continues as a pedal while the tonality of D flat moves above it. However, C persists as the pedal note until the end and it is the voice that finally ends on G, the pitch on which it began, leaving an almost "hollow" open fifth sound (5.19). As in Varuna II, the text imparts something of the unresolved. We do not know whether the prayer to Varuna was answered; similarly the god of Creation, the
“Primal One whose eye controlleth all things”, is meant to be the only Being to understand the secrets of the universe, but the seeds of doubt are planted at the end of the text. “He alone doth know it” is supported clearly in D with a root position chord; suddenly the singer wonders whether even he, the god who is not named, knows the secret. The key of D flat suddenly disappears and we are left again with the aforementioned naked C pedal, above which is sung “Or perchance even he knoweth it not!” The hollow fifth sound is in direct contrast to the previous bars in D flat leaving the harmony unresolved, and the upward inflection of the vocal line at the end suggests a question being asked but left unanswered.

Holst again uses the “colour” of changing tonal areas to illuminate his text. Here, the lightest and most stable section of the song is the Adagio in D flat (“He the Primal One”, etc). Gone now are the mighty forces heaving in restless motion of the very active middle section, and the gloom and nothingness of the opening solo vocal line. Equilibrium is achieved, and very clearly in D flat, if only for a short time before it is swept away, and the final uncertainty brings the song to a close.

The ninth and last song, *Faith*, is another deceptively simple song, the repeating verses of which give the impression of a purely strophic construction. Holst does not use the Sanskrit name “Sraddha” (Head, 1987, p 34) that identifies this hymn in the *Veda*. The key is F major but, as always this does not deter Holst from moving in and out of “unrelated” keys, and this motion flows easily due to smooth chromatic movement. Whereas the four verses in the vocal part are musically the same it is the lack of synchronisation between them and the accompaniment that provides the interest. The piano part is a descending pattern of broken chords that moves steadily
downwards by step. By the time the accompaniment reaches the next F pattern an octave lower the voice is still in the middle of its first verse. As the voice begins its second verse the piano has not reached F the octave below. The two parts only come together at the final note of the vocal line. One could say that the song is strophic on each of its two levels (i.e. voice and piano). The parts flow independently of one another and yet are integrated, another fine example of Holst's need for flexibility within a set structure (similar to Ratri, Indra and Varuna II, for example).

The harmony is more closely in line with that of the common-practice period; the tonic is clearly established at both beginning and end. The progression is identifiable throughout by means of traditional analytical notation; however the resulting pattern is rather unorthodox in terms of nineteenth-century harmony. There are two chords per bar, each played as broken chords by alternating hands, and the progression is determined by the descending line. The harmony is a by-product of the linear motion. The strongest harmonic pattern, apart from the final bars with the cadence resolving to I, is the piano interlude between the first and second verses (and between the third and fourth) (5.20). The voice comes to rest on the tonic note as the piano reaches the tonic chord, albeit in second inversion. Preserving the stepwise descent, the harmony moves then to the aurally dependable pattern of dominant seventh in third inversion, followed by tonic in first inversion, leading-note chord in first inversion, and reaches the tonic in root position on the downbeat of bar nine, by which time the next verse is already underway. Holst makes no use of dissonant clashes in this final song, no doubt reflecting the mood and the nature of the text.
While there are two clearly defined segments of the vocal part during each repetition the piano part makes three trips down from F, spanning three octaves. Each arrival at F does not coincide with any phrase endings in the voice, and each journey down from the previous F is different (5.21).

Raymond Head is surely correct in his description of the overall effect of the song as having “a calm assurance, a faith portrayed without doubt or strife” (Head, 1987, p 34). However, he speaks of the slowly falling broken arpeggio as a symbol of “Faith descending” but there is nothing in the text that suggests the descent of faith, whatever that may mean. He also attributes the rise of the arpeggio figure at the end of each pair of verses as having taken “its cue from ‘our song ascendeth ever higher’” failing to note that these words are not presented at or near the beginning of the song, but rather at the end of the second pair of verses. There are other references to ascent such as prayers rising in silent worship, the raising of songs to the god, etc. and these are not depicted in the piano part in any particular way. The ascent of the piano part is an issue quite apart from the text in this case. Unlike many of the other songs’ accompaniments, this last one displays an unchanging texture, and the gentle harmonic inflection and general tranquillity beautifully express contentment and inner peace. On a practical level, the rising piano part is needed to reach the beginning of subsequent verses.

In this song cycle alone there are clear indications of what Holst’s future musical language had to offer, and he brought everything he had learned from these songs to fruition in his operatic masterpiece Sāvītrī. One simple example deals with a melodic figuration that is used with more and more frequency; it is a readily identifiable
feature of the main theme in Sāvītri and is already being used in the Vedic Hymns. The span of the melodic fragment in question is usually a major third, or major second. During the phrase the major interval will narrow to become the minor or vice versa, or will begin in one form, change, and then return to its original. This blurring or combining of the major and minor is a way of freeing the ear of the dictates of the diatonic scale. There are examples in Ushas, Varuna I, and Creation. It will be instructive to compare these fragments with examples from Sāvītri.

The Vedic Hymns song cycle encapsulates the major changes that brought Holst to his mature sound. In summary, there are approximately seven elements illustrated by these songs that will be dealt with in detail with regard to the stylistic transition from Sita to Sāvītri:

- alternation between “dark” and “light” changes in harmonic colour
- stepwise motion of the bass line (which either moves independently, or effects changes of harmony by its movement)
- pedal points
- the “bare” sound of the fourth and fifth intervals
- understatement (in the form of orchestration, for example)
- the use of irregular metres such as 5/4 and 7/4
- modal harmony and melody.

Holst’s previous dissatisfaction with his personal style and his subsequent toil were rewarded with these nine songs that display simplicity combined with subtle and sophisticated design, bold innovation with harmony (such as modal borrowing, blurred tonality and unorthodox progressions), and liberation from diatonic scales.
Imogen Holst assures us that “These solo hymns...cost him many painful struggles, but they helped to achieve the miracle of his one-act opera, *Sāvitrī*” (Holst, I., p 18). But the painful struggles were experienced long before, during the extensive gestation period of *Sita*. The *Vedic Hymns* are individual miniature masterpieces in which Holst crystallised his various ideas of harmony, style and expression, and this is what prepared him for *Sāvitrī* the following year. He discovered that the simpler the concept of the construction of a work the more powerfully can its message be communicated, and this suited the character of Holst himself.
Holst began work on the chamber opera Savitri after he returned from a trip to Algeria in 1908, which he took on the advice of his doctor who had suggested that a warm climate would be beneficial for his worsening neuritis (Short, 1990, p 73). The work was completed on 27 April 1909. It was the second of the two operas whose libretti were translated by Holst from the original Sanskrit, and the composer described it as an ‘episode from the Mahābhārata’. It is a chamber opera, in stark contrast to the opera that preceded it although, like Sita, Savitri is the composer’s individual musical interpretation of the story without any attempt at imitating Indian music.

Holst originally intended the work for performance in the open air; if inside a theatre then there should be no curtain (or the curtain should be raised before the voice of Death is heard). The ensemble forces are minimal, consisting of only two string quartets, a double bass, two flutes and a cor anglais. Besides the three soloists a small chorus of female voices is heard representing the presence of Māyā, or Illusion, a concept which plays an important part in the unfolding of the drama. Neither the ensemble nor chorus are to be visible to the audience.

Holst’s own written directions on the first page of the score show that he had clear ideas about the production of the opera. He wished it to be as simple as possible, with no elaborate scenery and with only a few carefully controlled gestures. He left no suggestions for the design of the costumes, but he always insisted that the figure of Death should be dignified and god-like, with nothing in the least frightening or grotesque in the characterisation.

Holst, I., note to revised edition of Savitri, 1976, v
The ideal outdoor setting that Holst pictured for the work was a long path leading from the distance up to a foreground clearing (Short, 1990, p 77). There was no overture or prelude intended for the work but, at the insistence of those who later performed this *opera da camera*, Holst relented and in the published score stated that if a prelude is required, the ‘Hymn from the Travellers’ from the Third Group of *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* (op 26) may be used. His own personal preference, however, was that there be no prelude.¹

Holst waited seven years before he could have this latest opera produced; the premiere was given by the London School of Opera in December, 1916 under the baton of Hermann Grunebaum. It is interesting to note that the chorus Holst originally had in mind for this opera was one of mixed voices.

During the preliminary rehearsals the tenor line in the hidden chorus was always unsatisfactory, and Grunebaum suggested that Holst should rewrite the choral parts for women’s voices. The result was so successful that it was impossible to imagine it sounding otherwise, and years later, when *Sāvitrī* had been published, Holst gave the manuscript vocal score to Grunebaum in gratitude for his advice.

Holst, I., 1988, p 49²

The first professional performance of *Sāvitrī* was given in 1923 at Covent Garden; the BNOC performed it as a double bill with *The Perfect Fool*. Holst returned from the United States in time to attend the performance, having been invited to conduct at a musical festival at Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹ No sources give any explanation or conjecture as to why Holst may have suggested this Hymn from among the many available from the three groups of *Choral Hymns* alone. The engagingly rhythmic nature of *Travellers* and its supplication to the God that guides travellers from this world to the next may have seemed appropriate since the concept of journey plays such an important role in *Sāvitrī*.

² The vocal score is now at the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh. It was purchased by the Library at Sotheby’s (Lot 432) on 28 May, 1986.
As the subtitle clearly states, Holst chose a specific story from the *Mahābhārata* and altered certain elements of the story to suit his purpose. The *Mahābhārata* is an epic Hindu poem in seven volumes, the description of a three-week long battle between two cousins descended from Bhārata, and the tale of Sāvitri is taken from the third volume, ‘The Book of the Forest’ (Hopkin, 1978, p 3). The original story deals with love conquering death, which is Holst’s main interest in this episode. Briefly:

Sāvitri is a beautiful princess but, long past the usual marrying age, she has remained single. Her father worries that she will remain unmarried as all attempts to find a suitable husband have failed. One day she sees Satyavān, a woodcutter and son of a dispossessed king, in the woods: instantly, she realises that this is the man she has waited for all her life. They agree to marry. However, a sage called Narada tells her that while Satyavān is a noble person he has one major defect: he has only one year to live, and is unaware of this. Unperturbed Sāvitri proceeds with the marriage while Satyavān is still left in ignorance of his impending fate. The fateful day arrives, and Satyavān falls dead while out cutting wood. Sāvitri is left to confront the god of death (Yama). Recognizing that he is dealing with a remarkable and holy woman who is quite without fear, Death grants her five boons—the last of which, by a trick, enables Satyavān to return to life.

Head, 1988, p 35

Holst chooses only the heroine’s confrontation with Death as the central episode for his opera and, in his attempt to ‘humanise’ the story, removes any references to generations of royalty and to Hindu gods. ‘Death’ is identified thus and not as Yama, which gives emphasis to him as a concept rather than as an actual being, even though he is a character on stage. Also, there is one boon offered to Sāvitri as opposed to five—the one she will use to bring Satyavān back to life.³

It is characteristic of Mr. Holst’s attitude—characteristic, too, of his genius—that he has concentrated upon two aspects of the story: its humanity and its mysticism. There is nothing about Satyavān being a prince; he is simply a woodcutter. His father, his past history, and everything not absolutely essential have been omitted.

Trend, 1921, p 349

³ Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 7.
Regarding mysticism Holst introduces the important concept of *Mâyâ* and makes it central to the story. This element of Hindu philosophy actually appears later in Indian literature, in the last books of the *Rig Veda* “and is found for the first time as a word meaning “illusion” in the *Svetasvatar Upanishad* (iv, 10)” (Head, 1988, p 35). The inclusion of this concept was vital for expressing his own views on the subject with which he was dealing, and *Mâyâ* is a character in the opera as well, albeit in an abstract sense. It is the wordless female choir that is heard whenever reference is made to *Mâyâ*, and it serves to emphasise her presence. The idea of *Mâyâ* was understood by those philosophers on the Continent who studied Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. Schopenhauer referred to *Mâyâ* many times in all three volumes of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, and described it as

> the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and makes them see a world of which they cannot say whether it is or it is not: for it is like a dream; like the sunshine on the sand which the wanderer mistakes in the distance for water, or the stray piece of rope which he perceives to be a snake...

Schopenhauer, vol 1, first book, section 3, p 9

According to Hindu philosophy there is a way to conquer this ‘veil of deception’: ‘for the one whose will is motivated by love the veil of *Mâyâ* has become transparent, and he has been freed from the illusion of *principium individuationis*’ (Schopenhauer, vol 1, fourth book, section 66, p 438). It is in this very way that *Sâvitri* will conquer Death and have her husband restored to her: through her selflessness and her love as a faithful wife.

---

4 “...est ist die Maja, der Schleier des Truges, welcher die Augen der Sterblichen umhüllt und sie eine Welt sehen läßt, von der man weder sagen kann, daß sie sei, noch auch, daß sie nicht sei: denn sie gleicht dem Traume, gleicht dem Sonnenglanz auf dem Sande, welchen der Wanderer von ferne für ein Wasser hält, oder auch dem hingeworfenen Strid, den er für eine Schlange ansieht.” (Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, p 9, author’s translation). NB: these similes are found in countless passages of the “Vedas” and “Puranas”.

5 “...sondern durch seine Handlungsweise zeigt er an, daß er sein eigenes Wesen, nämlich den Willen zum Leben als Ding an sich...In eben diesem Grade nun durchschaut er das *principium individuationis*, den Schleier der Majaw...” (Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille*, p 438, author’s translation).
The highly philosophical nature of the libretto of Sāvitri combined with its minimal stage action invites comparison with the twentieth-century development of Symbolist music drama, which was not concerned with the depiction of a ‘realistic’ world. The most established example of symbolist opera is Debussy’s Péllea et Mélisande (1902), but the Symbolist ideal is also to be found in Delius’s A Village Romeo and Juliet (1900-01, performed 1907), Ariane et Barbe-bleue of Dukas (1907), and Bartók’s Duke Bluebeard’s Castle (1918), for example, as well as the character sketches that constitute Berg’s Wozzeck (completed in 1920 and produced in 1925).

‘The model...was Wagner, not only his ensemble and harmonic manner but also his use of characters who are to be regarded as archetypes, as vehicles for philosophical argument or deep psychological exploration’ (Griffiths, 1980, p 603). An article, “Pourquoi j’ai écrit Péllea”, written in 1902 by Debussy regarding his work on Maeterlinck’s drama, reveals elements of the play that are similar to the story from the Hindu epic that so attracted Holst.

The drama of Péllea which, despite its dream-like atmosphere, contains far more humanity than those so-called ‘real-life documents’, seemed to suit my intentions admirably. In it there is an evocative language whose sensitivity could be extended into music...

Debussy, cited in Langham Smith, 1992, p 934

Holst could easily have written these words with respect to his choice of the story of Sāvitri. He was also inspired by the other-worldliness of the story but appreciated the humanity inherent in it, and endeavoured to make these clear in his libretto⁶.

⁶ There is no evidence in Holst’s letters or in the Holstian literature which indicate whether he had ever attended a performance of Péllea et Mélisande. However he did have a certain admiration for Debussy, as well as enough understanding to satirise his style in Opera as She is Wrote of 1917.
In symboliste drama costume and scenery were not merely decorative but in some way had to represent the forces of the unseen. Dramatic action in its usual sense was also rejected; characters were meant to be seen as passive rather than active, submitting to the force of destiny. Holst would have been aware of the Symbolist poets and their ideals. However, there is one crucial difference: despite its symbolist features Holst’s heroine is not one to leave her situation in the hands of Fate (i.e. Death). She takes action by using her wit, and achieves the impossible.

Before looking at the work in detail it is important to point out the sense of coherence that one cannot fail to grasp in experiencing Sāvitri, a kind of effortlessness due to clear-cut leitmotifs that are introduced severally, then woven together contrapuntally throughout the opera in such a fashion as to indicate to the listener what is to come, or to act as a reminder of symbols/characters/situations pertinent to the drama at any given moment.

In order to define a clear contrast between the beginning of the work and the intricacy of the harmonic language that increases as the opera progresses, Holst at first eliminates the element of harmony altogether. This does not mean, however, that the element of drama is missing from the opening bars; the vocal line clearly has a tonal anchor, without which the notion of tonal ambiguity would not be possible.

The opera begins in a remarkable way: with no curtain, and faced with a bare stage, the audience is somewhat unprepared for the voice of Death, unaccompanied, announcing to Sāvitri that he is coming to take her husband. As Carolyn Abbate says, the ‘pure voice commands attention’ (1991, p 4) and in opera we rarely hear the voice
unaccompanied for such an extended passage. The utter simplicity of Holst’s opening
gesture is what makes it so striking and justifies the composer’s conception of the
work beginning without a prelude.

Some of the motivic material that is fundamental to the work is present in the narrow
and sinuous line that Death sings (6.1). Apart from five bars in the middle of this
opening statement the entire vocal line is centred on the pitch A, which is an
important central harmonic note. The first theme, presented as it is, uninterrupted,
inevitably becomes associated with the idea, the symbol of Death throughout the
work, and Holst uses it particularly for this purpose. The opening words are the
heroine’s name, stated twice, followed by “I am Death”. The musical line is A
moving downward by semitone to G# and the repeated note A is in the rhythm of
Sāvitrī’s name. This little melodic fragment will prove to be a vital rhythmic and
motivic cell; Holst will exploit its narrow, downward pull to make it intrinsically
associated with fear and foreboding (bars 1-3). There is a striking resemblance
between this opening and the (also unaccompanied) beginning of the song “Creation”
from the third set of Vedic Hymns. It is most likely that Holst drew on this song for
ideas regarding the opening of the opera (refer to 5.16).

Irrespective of its seamless nature smaller units are extracted from Death’s twenty-
five-bar-long monologue and are used throughout to emphasise elements of the plot.
Even though these smaller units take on lives of their own in the vocal and ensemble

---

7 Unlike the early operas the score for Sāvitrī is readily available; except in special circumstances bar
numbers will suffice in identifying moments of the work under discussion.
parts, a close look at Death's opening statement shows that they are in fact derived from the first three bars.

Bars 4 and 5 are an expansion of bars 1-3: after an upward stepwise motion spanning a perfect fourth interval—the upward curve being Death's assertion of power over the mere mortal—the line curves back to A, moves to G sharp—an already familiar melodic curve from the opening three bars—before coming to rest on F. In other words, the first three bars are the basic skeletal shape of the fourth and fifth. The line continues with the reappearance of A flat and comes again to rest on F in bar 7, with G sharp being re-spelled as A flat. Regardless of where these short portions of melody end, they find their way back to A. Already within the first few phrases Holst begins to use fragments of music and motifs established at the outset to create continuity in this solo line.

The relationship between F and A as well as between F and A flat are both featured in this passage creating deliberate tonal ambiguity, preventing the ear from associating with either the major or the minor mode (see accompanying diagram to 6.1).

Bar 8 is derived from bar 4, as the now familiar upward scalar motion spanning the perfect fourth is heard again, although the line digresses from there in bar 9. Bars 10-12 begin on A flat, but the phrase ends on A once again (bb 8-12).8

---

8 Please continue to refer to 6.1 during this discussion of Death's opening monologue. A copy of the score would be of significant benefit.
In bar 13 the shape of the theme broadens as Death sings a perfect fifth from A to E, ("I, the summoner, whom all obey") still emphasising A as central pitch. The central role of A is slightly obscured for the following six bars, which consist of descending scales that end on G sharp. Enharmonically, in bar 20, Holst then re-spells G sharp as A flat and is thereby able to return to the material he has already presented in bars 10-12. Bars 10-12 were a resolution of the first segment of Death’s monologue, and this portion of the opening music will be heard three times, thus bringing Death’s monologue to a close, firmly re-establishing A as the central note. This shifting between the major and minor third (A flat to F, and A natural to F) is characteristic of this motif and will draw attention to itself within the texture of the music to come (bb 13-25). The shift is a fine example of the juxtaposition of “dark” and “light” colours that was used frequently in the Vedic Hymns, and helps to blur any association with either A major or A minor tonality.

Ian Parrott has suggested that Holst’s music here is bi-tonal, in that this opening musical gesture combines A minor and F minor simultaneously.

The music starts literally from one note, A. Death calls “Savitri” twice on it and then falls for “I am Death” to the other note which although written as G sharp, I will call for the moment A flat. Here is music growing in two directions at once; upwards from A as if in A minor or downwards from A flat as if in F minor, the alternation making the whole immensely powerful.

Parrott, 1967, p 326

There is no doubt that the whole is immensely powerful, but not only because it suggests two different keys. Richard Greene, in his summary of Edmund Rubbra’s analyses of Holst’s music, points out that Rubbra was “the first to recognize the
theoretical and rhetorical importance of Holst’s polytonal work, saying that the term as usually applied was inappropriate” (Greene, 1994, p 6). Superimposed keys are not heard as separate entities, but produce something new. “Rubbra called these events “key-fusions” and they are a major issue under the concept of tonal extensions (Greene, 1994, p 6).” Parrott continues:

As I see it, such music, gradually diverging from an initial A, produces more genuine bitonality than any amount of simultaneity. Humphrey Searle, in a friendly argument with me in the pages of the Musical Times, August/October, 1938 said that parts in themselves could suggest different [keys] but “the result is always heard as a unity”. My plea was for the shifting mind as between one part and another (which we can apply to Holst’s Terzetto, 1925), at times in this piece of Holst there is no need for more than one part.

Parrott, 1967, p 327

There is no reason to suppose that one hears the first G sharp as A flat as Parrott suggested; the very fact that the melodic line moves immediately back up to A in the fourth bar gives the pitch in question a very strong G sharp identity. The constant return to A during the whole of Death’s opening music makes it the central pitch; the music is heard as a unity.

The pitch material of bars 10-12 is often extracted and combined with the opening rhythm of the first two bars to create a new idea, one that is used frequently throughout. By bar 25, Savitri has entered and sings, not a duet with Death, but clashing counterpoint against Death’s opening music, which he sings once again. Her counterpoint contains mostly new material against the music of Death, but in bars 27 and 28 Holst uses a motif in her vocal line with which we are already familiar; as she refers to her constant torture by the sound of his voice (6.2). Despite the single use of this motif the counterpoint sung against Death’s opening music is the first example in
the opera where the instability of the lines causes a feeling of tension between the 
characters. Had Sāvitri's part been more synchronised with that of Death there would 
be less element of tension, and the dramatic purpose of the scene would not have been 
achieved. Holst accomplished a similar kind of conflict in the highly important 
bridge-builders scene in *Sita* as Ravana hears their approaching voices and reacts with 
clashing counterpoint (refer to 4.28 and 4.29). This, as will be recalled, takes place in 
Act III, the part of the opera during which Holst true musical voice is finally being 
revealed.

As pointed out earlier, the most striking aspect of this opera is that up to this point it 
has been sung unaccompanied. The first sound of an ensemble instrument occurs as 
late as bar 43—a solitary viola echoing the voice of Death as he called Sāvitri's name 
at the beginning of the work. The mellow, alto instrument imbues the moment with 
darkness and sadness.

From the score of *Sāvitri* one discovers four general areas of tonality with respect to 
key signatures: the work opens without a signature; in bar 214 there appears one 
sharp, and in bar 278, two flats. The latter are cancelled at bar 451, leaving the music 
again without a key signature until the end. But to think of the work as being within 
the province of only three keys, the first of which returns at the end, would be an 
erroneous approach, for these key areas are not always apparent to the ear. Few 
central pitches are in control for long, and the score shows that the basis of Holst's 
language is modally-extended tonality. This type of tonal treatment was already
clearly in use in the *Vedic Hymns* and allowed him more freedom in his harmonic expression.\(^9\)

The harmonic and contrapuntal fluidity of the music defies the detection of these changes as one listens to the work in its entirety, but that does not mean that there is no significance to the appearance of these key signatures. There is, in fact, a strategic placement of the key signatures in that they act as signposts to important dramatic turns of event.

The work divides itself into four sections by means of the key signatures: no sharps/flats, one sharp, two flats, and finally a return to no sharps/flats (Figure 1). The key signatures do not indicate changes in the diatonic sense wherein a section simply modulates from one key area to another in the following section. Within each block there are a myriad of subtle changes by way of stepwise or chromatic motion and distantly related keys are frequently reached; often the key which is associated with a particular signature is not heard for some time. The general patterns of controlling key areas and modes are shown in Figure 2.

As one looks at the moments when these divisions occur it becomes clear that they were not chosen at random (which would be out of character with Holst’s working methods) but are moments of great import with regard to his drama (Figure 3). The opening section (the longest) presents his characters in detail as well as the situation in which they find themselves, thereby laying the foundation of the story to come.

\(^9\) Figure 3 shows the division of the opera into its four sections, as well as the dramatic elements that constitute these sections.
This is the longest section of the four and Holst takes his time with it in order to establish the situation very clearly, make his characters familiar to his audience, and stage the first of the important elements of the plot. The second, which begins with the change to one sharp, is the moment when faces Death not with fear but welcomes him with calm dignity which is, of course, the beginning of his undoing ("Welcome, Lord"). Reverence, mutual respect and a kind of quiet philosophy characterise this short portion. The appearance of the signature of two flats begins with the request of a boon, again a crucial moment in Sāvitri's plan for outwitting Death ("Give me Life"). It has a more exultant feel as she passionately proclaims her love of life and finally outwits Death. Death is banished and ordered back to his kingdom as the key signatures disappear for good. A deep spirituality and warmth replaces the fiery nature of the previous section as Sāvitri prays over Satyavan's lifeless body and rescues him from the Death's grip. The final section also witnesses all the early themes again in their most pure and simple forms. Reference to Figure 3 again will show how Holst planned the pacing of the drama in Sāvitri in terms of the timing; it is interesting to compare the second and third sections: each lasts approximately five minutes and yet the number of bars covered in the third is far greater than in the second—an indication of the successful pacing of the drama, an element lacking in the early works such as The Youth's Choice wherein the mature Holst was developing in terms of his use of themes, harmony and orchestration, but whose story was somehow missing dramatic "pull".

A natural effect of sudden changes of key is a change of "colour" in the music which affects the mood and can represent the drama that is happening on stage. The simple pattern of signatures (Figure 1) shows the obvious connection between the first and
Figure 1. *Sāvitrī* op 25: Key Signature Scheme

Figure 2. *Sāvitrī* op 25: Tonal Areas

Section 1

Central pitch

Section 2

Section 3

Section 4

Dorian  A  Dorian

Dorian  Aeolian  Dorian
**Sāvitrī op 25: The Four Sections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1</th>
<th>Plot development:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature: none</td>
<td>- threat by Death (introduction of character)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars: 213</td>
<td>- introduction of Sāvitrī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: 10 minutes</td>
<td>- introduction of Satyavān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- discussion of Māyā (establishes the concept)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- tragedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Death comes to take Satyavān</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 2</th>
<th>Plot development:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature: one sharp</td>
<td>- encounter of Sāvitrī and Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars: 64</td>
<td>- philosophical 'debate'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: 5 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 3</th>
<th>Plot development:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature: two flats</td>
<td>- affirmation of Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars: 173</td>
<td>- confrontation/argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: 5 minutes</td>
<td>- the “trick” played out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 4</th>
<th>Plot development:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature: none</td>
<td>- banishment of Death (‘Illusion’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars: 93</td>
<td>- resolution/restoration of harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: 7 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
last sections in that neither have a key signature. However, C major and its relative A minor play no part. A closer look at the construction of the important themes that are being introduced show the emphasis of the Aeolian and Dorian modes. The return of these themes in almost original use in the final section reveals the appearance of the same modes. The middle sections two and three display their true nature as the result of constantly transforming diatonic keys which contribute to the "fluid" effect described above.

It can be seen that the first and final sections establish and resolve the situation, respectively, and for this Holst generally chooses modal harmony and melody (with the exception of specifically desired effects such as the opening clash between the voices of Sâvitri and Death). Modal sounds lend a peaceful quality to the final scenes. The more passionate and sometimes argumentative nature of the middle sections are expressed by almost constant changes in diatonic harmony which push the drama forward and rarely give sense of stability. A notable exception is "Welcome Lord", when Sâvitri’s need to pacify a tragic and angry situation places her firmly within the realm of a calming G major for a considerable stretch of time (section 2); again, it is the drama which dictates that a harmonic solution such as this would prove most effective (Figure 2).

The music moves smoothly through innumerable tonal and modal areas via his characteristic linear motion—a feature of Holst’s idiom that will be demonstrated throughout—thus giving the music its seamless flow.
It is through this essentially linear approach that Holst arrives at his most personal harmony. To attempt to parse his harmonic progressions, let alone individual chords, by reference to traditional 19th-century harmony is a doomed enterprise, though in the past commentators have been lured into trying to explain their own puzzlement away by faulting Holst’s harmony in these terms.

_Warrack, 1974, p 732_

Holst is careful with respect to the musical language chosen to represent his ‘episode’. He introduces his characters and establishes the dramatic situation at the outset in very simple terms; the unaccompanied entries of the three characters (the third being Satyavān in bar 61) preclude associations with any particular harmonic progressions. However, these themes clearly revolve around central pitches. As the plot develops the harmonic language becomes more involved; during the central portion of the opera (central in the sense of its place in the scheme of bar numbers as well as in the sense of the plot) the harmony becomes much more chromatic and unstable. Vagrant chords (to borrow Schoenberg’s term) are used frequently as there appear sections whose progressions do not belong to one particular key. Transitions between these harmonies are often chromatic or step-wise as new chords are formed. A similar technique is used in the fifth of the _Vedic Hymns_ as the accompaniment’s chords move and change colour through step-wise motion against the vocal line that is formed of a whole-tone scale (refer to 5.9).

---

More specifically, Death’s part revolves around A (as we have seen), whereas Satyavan’s line has a distinct lower and upper goal of E. At this point in the story both characters display a sense of purpose, each in his way. Sīvīrti’s opening music, however, has no such clear-cut structure; she occasionally imitates what Death sings, and her part weaves around his without any particular musical objective, demonstrating her distraught state of mind. The construction of her themes changes drastically during the opera as she puts her plan into action, i.e. when she finds _her_ sense of purpose.
There are certain passages that do strongly suggest tonal areas and can be analysed using traditional labels, but these do not remain in effect for long, as linear motion once again introduces vagrant harmony, thereby eradicating excessive association with a specific key. Towards the end of the work when, in the plot, the conflict has been resolved, the textural simplicity with which the opera began is once more in evidence as well as even greater musical simplicity. Single chords will again form the harmonic basis for longer spans of music making the harmonic rhythm move more slowly, and the unaccompanied singing at the end will banish harmony altogether, leaving a solitary theme revolving around a central note.

From the beginning the prevalence of the pitch A in Death’s opening monologue and its repetition during the subsequent counterpoint between Death and Sāvitrī indicates that it governs the first forty-seven bars of the opera; it is a clear signal that A is of structural importance. The passage beginning at bar 43 and the music that takes the work to the beginning of Satyavān’s theme in bar 61 is transitional in nature, acting as a bridge to this new theme, which is centred on E. The two flutes in their lower register are heard in bar 46 and, along with the viola, provide the first instrumental sonority in the opera; their purpose at this point is to accompany Sāvitrī’s part as she again echoes a motif from Death’s opening music (bb 46-48) and to aid in moving the central note to F in bar 50. Harmony reflects the dramatic situation as Sāvitrī’s line leaps to an E while the flutes and cor anglais sustain an F minor triad (6.3)—a tortured chord with its clash of E against F that conveys her despair at the thought of her husband’s imminent death.
Holst limits his material in the opening scenes to nothing but unaccompanied voices, and relies on the change of the central note from A to F to achieve dramatic effect. Sāvitrī again sings alone (with minimal accompaniment, bb 40-60) as Holst prepares to introduce Satyavān by means of a portion of his leitmotif played by the cello (6.4). The flutes reappear at this point supporting Sāvitrī’s line playing in thirds, alternating between C/E and D flat/F in stepwise motion. This use of the flutes in thirds (or inverted as sixths) is characteristic of the accompaniment to Sāvitrī’s part (6.5). Her part ends on G sharp in bar 61 as she quotes a motif of Death’s music once more, thereby enabling the shift to the tonality of E, and the bridge to Satyavān’s entrance is accomplished.

Unaccompanied voices and those with minimal accompaniment have already appeared in the previous two Sanskrit works; Holst experimented with this in Sīta. Two notable examples are the passage sung by Lakṣman when describing the hunt for the golden fawn during which he is accompanied only by a brief chord in the brass, and Rama’s confrontation with Surpanakha when he demands to know the whereabouts of the kidnapped Sīta. These scenes occur in Act II and Act III respectively and depict crucial moments in the drama. The element of minimal accompaniment is also in evidence in the Vedic Hymns, and Holst continues to use the sparing accompaniment in Sāvitrī for the same purpose (as we have seen thus far during Sāvitrī’s struggle against the impending doom of Death).

The thematic fragment played by the cellos and referred to above expands and becomes the first theme of Satyavān as he is heard singing in the distance beginning
at bar 61 (6.6). Satyavān's part is sung unaccompanied as well, except for tremolo in the upper strings on E as Death's opening bar is heard sung both by husband and wife, not as repeated notes, but now as a melodic unit (6.7).

Holst uses the dominant-tonic relationship to introduce Satyavān's second theme (b 72). The eleven bars centred on E (bb 61-71) prepare for the reappearance of the central pitch class A at bar 72 when Satyavān introduces the second theme with which he will be strongly associated (and the one Sāvitri will sing to great effect near the end of the opera). The theme is modally centred on A and alternates with the theme centred on E. The audience hears Satyavān's unaccompanied line as he sings off-stage, the direction in the score stating that he is approaching from a distance. When he appears on stage he repeats his themes with the added support of the ensemble that punctuates the musical line with tonic and dominant harmonies. This is the second character who has been introduced by means of off-stage singing. The purpose of this for Satyavān is two-fold: the first is to aid his entering from afar and secondly it impresses upon the listener more effectively a theme that will be associated with him later in the opera. The same applied to the voice of Death at the opening, whose themes (and motifs deriving from it) will play important roles in the cohesion of the work.

At bar 97 the harmony changes suddenly as Satyavān becomes aware of Sāvitri's fear. The appearance of sustained pedal notes F and A bring the light-hearted feeling of Satyavān's entrance to an abrupt end, and he sings a line that has E as its goal. Sāvitri responds by continuing her vocal line on the same E (b 100). Thus the same clash of F against E that featured earlier in Sāvitri's part is used again to convey apprehension.
It is in bar 101 that Holst begins to make more use of his ensemble forces and, as Sāvitri continues to sing of her foreboding, the leitmotif associated with Death, which features the shift between the major and minor third, is heard in the cellos and double bass. Its characteristic shape reminds the listener that Death is threatening, and it is a fine example of the shift between light and dark harmonic colour. The success of this effect is due to its having been impressed on the listener’s memory from the commencement of the work and already used several times, woven into the fabric of the preceding music. Chordal structures appear in the upper strings now, supporting the voice and giving more intensity to Sāvitri’s description of her fear. Musically, the goal of her vocal line is C in bar 107; this is the moment when the hidden chorus is first heard, sustaining an F minor triad, a tonal area of secondary importance so far. The chorus’s presence underscores Satyavān’s reference to Māyā, the first mention in the opera of the concept of illusion. Through linear motion Holst makes Satyavān’s part fluctuate between F minor and A major sonorities, the change of tonal area and the brightness of the major mode giving his philosophical argument a positive and enlightened feeling (dark to light).

As he continues to sing, the harmonic rhythm accelerates as vagrant chords change with greater frequency, moving by means of Holst’s characteristic linear movement. The frequency of the changing chords gives the music a heightened emotional intensity; the major mode is emphasised, giving a feeling of reassurance, and the colour of the harmony contrasts sharply with Sāvitri’s entrance at bar 128, when the minor mode is once again in control. Along with the reappearance of the minor comes the ominous sound of the double bass and cello moving slowly upward chromatically.
It is the ensemble that is most clearly communicating to the listener that Sāvitri’s fears have not been assuaged due to the music’s dark colour and the stepwise motion that was characteristic of Death’s opening theme. Her line is a recitative that moves the music towards a discourse between the two characters against which is heard one of Death’s motifs (6.8). The pitch A had gained control of the music by bar 134 when the double bass reached it via the chromatic scale. Passages of music in the style of recitative play an important part in Sāvitri and Holst was already making use of this parlante style of singing in Sīta, particularly during lines that are unaccompanied, or sustained by a pedal; he uses it as well to highlight moments of important story-telling that clarify the plot, such as in the second act. The Vedic Hymns were treated in similar manner and in “Varuna I” Holst directs the singer to sing “as if improvising” while the accompaniment remains static, consisting mainly of pedal points. This follows the same dramatic principle as in the operas, since the song is a prayer and must be interpreted with a great deal of intensity and feeling.

Satyavān sings his leitmotif once more (b 139), but is interrupted in mid-phrase as he is suddenly in Death’s grip (b 148)—Death is visible in the distance on stage for the first time (b 147). The appearance of Death’s leitmotif in the double bass, in augmentation, coincides with the physical, but not vocal, presence of Death. The scene that ensues sees the death of Satyavān, and it is dominated by this leitmotif, which is repeated throughout.

The central pitch changes to F at bar 146 and the double bass plays Death’s theme beginning on F. This same scene is also a good example of the way in which Holst uses counterpoint to combine motifs with which we are already familiar. Different
motifs from Death’s opening music are given to individual instruments; the minimal effort with which the music flows as well as its directness of expression exemplifies a level of sophistication not seen before in Holst’s work. The presence of Death saturates the ensemble part as Satyavān sings freely against it, similar to the way in which Sāvitri sang ‘against’ Death at the beginning of the opera. Once again, dramatic tension is achieved by lines working against one another.

As Sāvitri tries to console her dying husband she sings a fragment of a new theme (b 155-56); Death’s motifs are still audible in the double bass and cor anglais. This new theme is presented in its complete form beginning at bar 159 (6.9). This technique was used earlier when Sāvitri first sang of her husband. Holst gives the listener but a taste of the theme to come by presenting it only in part; it is heard in full only when the dramatic situation demands it, but it is already recognisable. It now feels more like a melody, less like a recitative, and is presented in arioso style. The fourth song of the Vedic Hymns, “Indra”, uses this idea as the piano begins with a portion of the singer’s opening theme, foreshadowing the beginning of the song proper.

The new theme quoted in example 6.9 begins after a pause and has the nature of an aria. Sāvitri begins her theme on D, the new central pitch, accompanied only by pedal notes (the two flutes playing D/F). Her song is one of comfort to her husband, and the stillness of the music due to the pedal notes has a similar effect to that of an unaccompanied solo in that the attention is drawn to her solitary voice. Holst keeps the accompaniment to this theme extraordinarily simple, emphasising the theme’s importance, and in fact it will be used near the end of the work at the point of resolution in the drama. The stage directions state that Death is ‘ever drawing nearer’,
and before she has completed her new theme fragments of Death's now very familiar leitmotif interrupt in the low strings, again giving the ensemble the role of commenting upon the dramatic situation, and again darkening the colour of the harmony. The ensemble texture expands when Sāvitri finishes her theme and, again, elements of the leitmotif of Death are heard as she continues in free counterpoint.

The theme, centred on D, reappears in bar 183 as she continues her discourse, expressing her fear and powerlessness in the face of the situation. Together with this are the now familiar flutes in thirds that have become a characteristic of the accompaniment to her part.

Holst avoids any reference to Death's leitmotif during this passage, and just before he sings centre-stage the full ensemble supports Sāvitri's line by doubling it as she swears to protect Satyavan from the forces of evil. This support from the ensemble gives emphasis to her feelings. Her line's goal now is E flat, and when she reaches it at bar 200 Death makes himself known to her by calling her name, also on E flat (similar to the opening music). A dissonant chord, consisting of E flat, G and D (b 204), serves to emphasise the announcement of the word "Death", after which he continues the motif heard at the beginning of the work, but dropping by a fifth to the G below. (G is now the central pitch, displacing the A of the opening music.) The momentum of the previous music is replaced by the fixed accompaniment of an E flat pedal note, a way in which Holst ensures that the listener's attention will be drawn to the voice and the important thematic material that it presents.
Death's four opening phrases are repeated until the words "I am the gate that opens for all". This is followed in the next bar by the first key signature in the work—one sharp. The E flat pedal that supports Death's first sung line on stage acts as transition to the goal of the bass which is D, and the bass moves to it by semitone when the key signature appears. The pitch-class D here functions as a dominant pedal to the new key of G major when the key signature appears; in this case, the advent of the new key changes the "colour" and mood of the work to one of serenity with its stable sound. It succeeds, therefore, as a dramatic tool in changing the course of the action.

The above motion to D heralds a dramatic change in the harmonic colour of the work, as the ensemble prepares for Sāvitri's next entry. This is an extremely important moment, as her reaction to the presence of Death is one turning point in the drama. Sāvitri's stance in the face of Death is the cornerstone to the resolution of the plot. The chorus is heard once again in bar 214 when the goal of D is achieved, as a pedal played by one cello and the double bass; the voices enter severally, and together form a major ninth chord (the ninth of which is the D pedal, and fulfils its role as the dominant pedal). The sound of these two bars (bb 214-15) is quite remarkable considering the dramatic situation—the effect is one of serenity and the acceptance of Death, something Holst would have understood, having adopted precepts of Hindu philosophy while learning Sanskrit and reading the literature. The effect of these bars ensures the listener that there is no fear present (dark to light), and that something significant is about to happen in the plot. In fact, the span of music from bars 214 to 225 is all diatonic, devoid of any chromatic colouring. And sure enough, to our amazement, Sāvitri begins the next section by calmly welcoming Death and singing of the honour she feels being in his
presence, calling him the Just One. As already noted, all this is presented with the support of a D pedal. Even though, in terms of theory, the D is a dominant pedal, which therefore forms a second inversion, there is a feeling of rest about this section and no sense of a need to resolve a chord. Holst used the pedal point in Sita as early as the beginning of the second act when he was “in transition”, that is, elements of the mature Holst were coming to the fore. Pedals are found in abundance in the opus 24 songs, whereby the piano directs the listener’s attention to the text being sung.

Apart from the strings that maintain the pedal note the only accompaniment Holst uses here is the chorus, symbolic of the spiritual or mystical element of the scene. The flute, the instrument most often associated with Sāvitri, is added at points throughout this passage. The music is in the area of G major, but there is no clear reference to G as a tonic; the pedal on D that continues throughout this portion of the work functions as a ‘dominant’ pedal; it and the key signature are the means by which G controls the tonality of this passage. In bar 227 the key shifts momentarily to B flat; while there is a sudden change to this new (and seemingly unrelated) key, D is still consonant and continues to function as a pedal.  

At this point we have entered the central portion of the opera, and it begins with the discourse between Sāvitri and Death at bar 232 as he responds to her greeting. Holst brings Death into the musical fabric by using the familiar motif from his opening music: as Sāvitri sings G flat and the tone is darkened momentarily by it, Death answers with the same pitch class, and his first words to her use the motivic cell G  

---

D relates G major to B flat major by being both the dominant note of the first key as well as the mediant note of the second; by using D as pedal Holst is able to link distantly related keys effortlessly and keep the entire passage within a diatonic framework.
flat-F-E flat-G. The music is thereby brought back now more fully to the region of G with the added support of the pedal that is now tonic as opposed to dominant. The D pedal, therefore, having been a melodic goal itself earlier on is now fulfilling its role as dominant to the arrival of G as the new pedal.

Death sings new material in bars 234-248. There is no reference during these bars to his opening music, for he is not an inescapable threatening force now, but is reacting to Savitri’s welcoming song, and sings praises to her. The language is much more diatonic, and lacks dissonance. This, plus the added security of a tonic pedal, imbues this passage with serenity that may serve to express the “holiness” of which the characters are singing. The effect of calm in the music due to these elements helps to convey the philosophical nature of their meeting.\(^\text{12}\)

The chorus, as well as the pedal note G in the second cello and double bass, continue the atmosphere of Death’s aria and serve to close this section in bars 248-51. Bar 252 moves the music to a new passage of recitative and to the new (albeit temporary) tonal area of B major, beginning in bar 253. B major serves as key area due to its relationship to G and B flat: it reflects the major third/minor third dichotomy that characterises the motivic cell used most often to represent Death. The upper strings take over the instrumental part and sustain a B major triad in its second inversion; after establishing the tonality the instruments disappear, leaving Savitri singing unaccompanied. The sense of her words here are positive, and the theme she sings is characterised by confident leaps, as opposed to moments of fear or threat when themes move largely by stepwise motion (6.10). The use of B major at this point has a dramatic purpose as well in that it lends brightness to the sound, which is ushered in

\(^{12}\) This musical treatment of the concept of Death brings to mind a later work, the Op 38 *Ode to Death* of 1919 whose text of Whitman “Come, lovely and soothing death” is heard in a gentle A major, the chords of which, however, are not strictly common practice harmony, but clearly diatonic nonetheless. A tonic pedal is used as well which gives the passage serenity very much like this one.
by the chorus whose soprano line curves upward to reach a high B. This vivid effect suggests Savitri’s forthcoming victory. Her sense of purpose here is very well defined; therefore her vocal passage is centred clearly on B.

Her serene invitation is met with a fragment of music from the opening scene, as Death refuses to accept, and he attempts to take on the role of impending doom once again. Yet his recitative carries on as he sings of a boon that he will grant to “thee who dost not shrink from me” and the words “I will grant a boon” (bb 263-64) are loosely based upon his familiar motivic cell. The goal of the line is B♭, and the shape of this cell is now A♭-F-B♭. In bar 264 the ensemble introduces a new motif, one that will appear whenever reference is made to the boon. Its shape is characterised by angular, leaping motion (6.11).

In order to represent Savitri’s vehement objection to the boon offered in exchange for her husband’s life Holst uses the unsettling sounds of rushing diminished seventh arpeggios in the strings accompanied by the marking *agitato*; the harmony heard in the ensemble expresses the anguish of her words. A semitonal step connects the two diminished seventh chords used during her passage: a diminished seventh arpeggio A sharp-C sharp-E-G with the strings beginning on different pitches moves to A-C-D sharp-F sharp, a more uniform arpeggio beginning on C. The unstable effect reinforces the anger expressed in this section. The Andante maestoso of bar 273 then establishes E flat as the bass of the chord C-E flat-G-B flat that alternates with D-F sharp-A in root position. This alternation of chords continues as Death responds in kind to Savitri’s anger and prepares to take Satyavan, but Savitri stops him. An arpeggio, the root of which is B flat, is heard in the strings after which she asks for

---

13 In the original manuscript, a motif from the following bar (played by the ensemble) was used for these lyrics, and there was string accompaniment that consisted of a chord (A flat-D-F, read from lowest to highest). These were crossed out, and Death’s line was replaced with the above motif that is sung unaccompanied.
the boon to be granted, singing the motif that is associated with it. The key area is also once again B flat in which the idea of the boon was first presented.

This is a pivotal moment in the drama, as Savitri realises how she can outwit Death by proclaiming her greatest wish. It is at this point that the key signature changes again, to that of B flat, the key now associated with the idea of the granting of the boon.

Irrespective of the signature Holst begins the new section not by establishing the tonic chord of B flat (even though the harmony preceding it—the second inversion of vii—would lead one to expect this), but by tonicising closely related keys, such as the key of E flat (vii7 with raised fifth in b 278), and the relative minor (b 287). It is not unique to this part of the opera; due to the somewhat unclear changes of key the music maintains its endless flow. With respect to themes, Savitri’s plea for life (b 278) is a new and important musical idea that Holst introduces during the central portion of the drama, and this theme will be used again later to great effect. At bar 287 use is made once more of Death’s familiar motif as Savitri refers to his song (6.12); simultaneous use is made of two closely related keys as the motif is heard in G minor as B flat-A-G-C flat, while it is echoed in the cor anglais and lower strings in the realm of B flat as A flat-G-F-B flat (x and y respectively; see 6.13).

Savitri’s petition for life continues; it is highly charged with emotion and the harmonic rhythm reflects the sense of what she sings. B flat is brought back (as a root position chord) through a perfect cadence only in bar 311, but in the meantime stepwise descending motion in the double bass allows the music to travel through keys such as A flat minor, E flat minor and secondary dominants of B flat.

A new motif is introduced in bar 301 during Savitri’s monologue, which is played by the violins, and is based upon her line. In its future appearances it is heard solely in
the ensemble, and is of importance due to its frequent use until the end of the work. This motif is associated with triumph over Death—in effect, a leitmotif representing 'Life' (6.14).

Death returns in bar 312, again changing the colour of the harmony; specifically, from Sāvitrī’s B flat major to his G minor. These keys are obviously related by signature; also G minor is a modal transformation of the G major that was so prevalent in earlier portions of the work. In bars 313-14 Holst uses a form of the well-known motif associated with Death at the words “Thou hast it now”. The harmony during this bar is V6/4 of G minor, and the motif is represented as A-G sharp-F sharp-B flat (i.e. stepwise down from A and leaping up to B flat from F sharp).

Bars 312 to the downbeat of bar 317 reinforce G minor with the help of arpeggio motion in the strings; a diminished triad in bar 317 serves to erase the sound of G minor, and allows Sāvitrī to sing a recitative-like passage freely for four bars unaccompanied until the end of the phrase. A sense of stability is restored in bar 322 as her plea for Life from bars 278-82 reappears. But it is far from being a simple reiteration of that earlier material: her aria moves in a new direction after those opening five bars, and this gives it its sense of momentum. Holst emphasises G minor, and a favourite Holstian device of stepwise motion takes the bass line to A flat before coming to rest on the tonic chord of G minor, which is the beginning of a new phrase.

Downward steps bring the bass line to F sharp where the impetus stops momentarily as Sāvitrī explains to Death that he works alone; downward stepwise motion then continues to move the vocal line forward until it reaches the Andante of bar 364.

Holst continues to use the descending line in the bass to create momentum; from bar 321 it began on D and steadily moved down to A flat at bar 364. When this motion is
arrested momentarily it is due to some aspect of the drama that Holst wishes to highlight. The supporting line comes to rest on G as Sāvitri expresses her belief to Death that he is ‘a portal soon passed’, a line based on the theme first heard at bar 100 when she sings ‘The forest is to me a mirror’. Her words are emphasised both by the stillness of the music consisting of a sustained triad and by the appearance of the ‘give me life’ motif played by the first flute immediately following (6.15).

Holst achieves the effect of stillness centred on G in the ensemble while continuing the downward step of the bass. Sāvitri’s asserts the eternity of Life, reinforced by the ‘Life’ motifs in the flute and violins (6.16).

The tonal area of G dominates this particular segment, but it does not arrest the general downward movement of the bass, which continues at bar 380: the bass steps upward to B at which point it turns and moves down again. From b 372 to 380 the music is not moving chromatically, but is in G major despite the key signature, and the harmony can be analysed using common-practice language: I6-V4/3-IV6/4 (6.17).

Sāvitri draws attention to Life’s supremacy over Death, and the harmonic rhythm now moves at a slower pace. There is solidity and self-assurance in her words; Holst preserves the movement of the music while maintaining dramatic stability. She emphasises the logic of her wish once again, and the ‘boon’ motif suggests itself in the strings in bars 376-77.

By a chromatic downward step from G to G flat, Holst is able to shift the music into the key of D flat, albeit temporarily. The progression is simple, and spans four bars: V4/2-I6 in D flat major. As with the appearance of B major earlier, D flat lends a sense of joy and brightness as she sings of Life’s eternity and its supremacy over Death. The
violins give the ‘boon’ motif to the flutes as they take over the ‘Life’ motif while Sāvitri continues to convince Death of the validity of her request. Different motifs are layered and combined with harmonies that move upward by step (beginning at b 392). The chords that are formed can best be identified as vagrant chords and produce a dramatic effect. Holst adds crescendo and poco accelerando as Sāvitri finishes her phrase. This passage uses the ensemble to its full capacity; since this occurs rather infrequently it immediately suggests something of dramatic importance. Holst reserves the full ensemble for important effects, just as he does when withholding the instruments completely. Here Sāvitri is singing of the triumph and joy of eternal life; her fervour demands the same from the ensemble, and it is at this point that her passion is at fever pitch. It is also the point in the opera approaching the climax of the story: Death’s granting of the boon.

These elements together build the drama and prepare for Death’s entry at bar 399. His entry is preceded by the ‘Give me Life’ motif played with deliberate emphasis by the violins of both quartets, ff and is an indication that Death is about to grant her wish. He sings in counterpoint to this theme as the bass resumes downward stepwise movement, beginning on A flat (6.18).

The music steps from A flat to G and forms the basis for V₄₋₂-ⅰ₆ in E flat, after which vagrant progressions are determined by the movement in the bass and other voices. When Death reaches that crucial line of text ‘Life is Thine in all its Fullness’, the music has reached the key of B flat. Due to its bass line the harmony can be labelled V₆₋₄-ⅰ₆-IV₄₋₂-Ⅹ₇, which gives the feeling of a meandering lack of resolution. Words such as these signify triumph and surely warrant a more purposeful harmonic progression; here again Holst’s dramatic purpose becomes clear as Sāvitri’s truly victorious interruption is about to take place.
The music indicates a dramatic change in what has been an uninterrupted flow of themes, emotions and ideas by suddenly introducing an unexpected minor ninth interval, causing a chord that brings all action to an abrupt halt. The double bass in bar 412 drops from C to the C flat below, and the chord C flat-E flat-A (containing a tritone) is heard momentarily; chords with tritones are often used by Holst to eradicate any sense of tonality to draw attention to dramatic moments in the text. It is at this point that Death agrees to Sāvitri’s request, and she is now free to confront him. Typical of Holst’s treatment of seminal moments of the text the sound of the ensemble suddenly disappears and the singer is heard unaccompanied—not an entire phrase or passage in this case, but a single note (6.19).

Holst marks the next passage ‘vivace’ and imparts a mischievous quality to the music through repeated staccato notes in the strings, creating the atmosphere for Sāvitri to announce with delight to Death that her ploy has succeeded. Her vocal line makes subtle use of the ‘boon’ motif (6.20).

At this point a new chain of ‘unstable’ progressions creates a momentum that moves the music to the chord of D flat in its second inversion, when the ensemble again ceases, bringing this momentum to a halt. Sāvitri sings a passage firmly centred on D flat wherein she emphasises to Death, unaccompanied, that he must keep to his promise (6.21).

At bar 423 the music resumes its motion; the violas play the motif that represents Māyā. This was first heard at bar 122 introduced by Satyavān, and here Sāvitri’s next reference is to her husband (6.22).
The motif reappears throughout this passage transposed and is an important part of the instrumental texture, even appearing in augmentation (albeit with slight alteration in its intervallic construction) in the lower strings. (6.23)

When the ensemble resumes at bar 423 the Māyā motif is heard against an E flat triad, and E flat remains the central tone for the next few bars. The presence of a central tone stabilises the music, and the drama is affected by this relative calm, as Sāvitri explains to Death that life in all its fullness is not possible without Satyavan.

Stepwise, ascending bass motion beginning in bar 429 takes the music through another statement of the Māyā motif and passes through C, functioning here as the first inversion of A minor. Holst uses the technique of layering motifs that are related in meaning, and from bar 433 onwards the texture is contrapuntal rather than harmonic. Sāvitri’s line weaves freely around the instantly familiar motifs that work together as counterpoint: Māyā with ‘Life’ and later, to great effect, Māyā (sung by the chorus that has reappeared) combined with the motif ‘give me life’. The augmentation of the Māyā motif in the low strings (see 6.23) ended on E at which point the bass begins to move upward by step. The texture broadens as Holst layers three of the recently used motifs, all of which emphasise life and the gift of life (6.24).

In the Adagio at bar 451 Sāvitri ends her declaration to the accompaniment of the ‘give me Life’ motif, fff, in augmentation and forthwith she orders Death back to his kingdom; he must honour his word. An instrumental interlude ensues during which Death finally realises that he has been defeated, and Sāvitri goes to Satyavan, determined to bring him back. This portion of music is built around what we
recognise as the ‘boon’ motif, and in the depths of the ensemble can be heard fragments of Death’s opening monologue.

In what is possibly the most heartfelt moment in the opera Sāvitri kneels over the body of her husband to summon him back from the grip of death. In an ingenious use of the available themes Holst chooses Satyavan’s own opening music for her to sing, a theme that we already associate with him, not with her, and it is sung in arioso style. Whereas the first time it was heard in a carefree and happy tone, now it takes on the nature of a prayer. It is set against a solitary pedal note in the cellos, thereby directing the listener’s attention to it and emphasising the intensity of the mood (6.25).

At the moment of Satyavan’s awakening Holst uses part of the theme that was first associated with him, in the same spirit of liveliness. A momentary grim reminder of the presence of Death is played by the lower strings as Satyavan claims he has dreamt of a threatening stranger. Another carefully planned appearance of the chorus gives Sāvitri’s vocal line an other-worldly quality, as she explains that a Holy One had come who had blessed them. The presence of the chorus is made clear as Satyavan sings of having been in the grip of Mâyā. As husband and wife pledge their need for one another Holst punctuates the moment with the ‘boon’ motif, and ‘give me Life’ is heard played by a solo viola. The two leave the stage leaving Death, who is seen in the distance.

Death’s final appearance, and consequently the last time any of his motifs are heard, comes in an extraordinary passage wherein he admits that he has been conquered by one who is free from Mâyā, and realises that “even Death is Mâyā”. In the deepest
strings is heard the music he sang at the beginning to the words “I am the law that no man breaketh, I am he who leadeth men onward”. As he disappears his final words are interrupted by Sāvitri who is heard singing in the distance. The opera ends with her reprise of the arioso passage that began “I am with thee, my arms around thee”. As in the opening, the voice is heard offstage, the singer unseen. Holst balances the beginning and ending by using this same effect: the solo voice at the opening carried the message of fear and foreboding; the voice now at the end reinforces life and the triumph of love over death.

The above discussion of this piece beginning on p 135 has a dual function: it is a descriptive guide to the opera from beginning to end, and an illumination of the way in which motifs and harmony are used in the construction of the work as well as their dramatic function. All the elements that came to fruition in the *Vedic Hymns* are in evidence in *Sāvitri*, but there is an added aspect to this opera that makes it unique in Holst’s output. His goal was that of utmost dramatic expression using minimal resources, and the foundation of this operatic masterpiece is the art of counterpoint. This was most likely Holst’s first work of this magnitude to rely on contrapuntal technique to such an extent. It was his great skill as a musical dramatist that allowed him to present several musical fragments, motifs, and themes in such a way as to attach to them specific associations with certain characters, situations or ideas and then to maintain the endless flow of an entire opera through the combination and interweaving of these motifs. While these are reminiscent of the Wagnerian approach to music drama, Holst was able finally to make the sound his own. It was his long and arduous work on *Sita*, his dissatisfaction with much of it, and most certainly his experience in composing the *Vedic Hymns*, which gave him the confidence to use his
technique for expression on a larger scale. While the process used in Śāvitrī is not particularly complicated, its intricacy is of a level of sophistication that reflects the deeply philosophical nature of the subject.

Different writers have rather dissimilar views on Holst’s opus 25. According to one source this is “[Holst’s] first fully mature work for the operatic stage” and he “never matched the perfection and power of Śāvitrī” (Rye, 1995, p. 349); also “as an opera composer...Holst was successful neither before nor after this ‘miracle’” (Parrott, 1967, p. 323). It is unfortunate that Parrott did not expand further on this thought; it would be difficult to compare Śāvitrī with the operas that followed, for the cultural climate had altered quite drastically after the war and Holst’s interest by that time regarding subject matter for stage works was very different from the ancient and philosophical Mahābhārata. Also, the use of the word “miracle” may imply that the creation of Śāvitrī was some sort of happy accident and that Holst did not develop musically toward this goal, the evolution of which can be clearly traced.

A further opinion put forth is that “in some respects it is not quite a mature product” but “it contains, nevertheless, seeds which later came to ripeness in the remarkable later works” (Bonavia, 1976, p. 1401). More importantly, Holst himself was able to write to W.G. Whittaker in 1917 with conviction that “the words and music really grew together” (Short, ed., 1974, p. 24), a goal for which he had long striven.

---

14 These writers, unfortunately, do not specify in what way(s) Śāvitrī is or is not a mature work, according to their points of view.
In his article on *Sävitrī* of 1921 J.B. Trend claimed that ‘the burden of expression lies wholly with the voices’ (Trend, 1921, p 350). It is true that the ensemble forces are small and are used sparingly, but a detailed examination of themes and motifs both in the vocal and instrumental parts reveals that much of the musical discourse is indeed to be found in the instrumental fabric. All parts work in tandem to foretell events, to comment upon the action of the libretto and the characters’ struggles, and the themes are truly leitmotifs regardless of which instrument or vocal part assumes the task of performing them. According to Imogen, even though Holst’s days of Wagner worship are over, Holst has not rejected Wagner, but has been led by him to “fresh things” as Holst himself had written to Vaughan Williams from Berlin in 1903 (Vaughan Williams, U. and Holst, I., 1959, p 12). The entire opera, a mere thirty minutes in length, flows without a break; there are no arias *per se*, but there are themes and leitmotifs which will return (as first heard, or in various guises) to guide the listener’s ear as representations of certain characters or philosophical ideals. The themes are subjected to certain changes in intervallic shape in order to adapt to their harmonic and/or contrapuntal environment without losing their strong symbolic functions. Alterations in rhythm, in particular, play an important role, and this opera is another example of Holst’s use of constantly changing metres, including asymmetrical five beats and seven beats to the bar, in order to adapt to the natural flow of the text, as he did in the *Vedic Hymns* and other earlier works.

Even though Holst’s use of leitmotifs in *Sävitrī* is germinal to the musical clarification of the characters, situations and philosophical aspects of the opera, Holst relies on chord progressions and his harmonic treatment of the themes to convey his characters’ states of mind, and the situations occurring in his drama. The pacing of the drama
depends on the relative stability or instability of the harmony at any given moment. An overview of the harmonic structure of the entire work shows where moments of dramatic peak occur, as well as moments of relative control. The opening scenes of the opera are meant to introduce characters and establish the situation, and the final ones are designed for the resolution of the conflict. In both cases the harmonic rhythm moves at a much slower pace. The struggle between Savitri and Death occupies the central portion of the work and is one of the most dramatic scenes; this is where Holst's harmony is suitably at its most intricate and unstable. Holst uses the instrumental ensemble sparingly; its main function is to maintain the endless flow and to combine leitmotifs that bind the work together. He reserves its full strength to emphasise climactic points of the drama. As indicated earlier the wordless chorus of female voices is heard whenever reference is made to Mâyā, and it serves to emphasise the mystical nature.

Most other works of around this time and soon after were influenced by the folk song movement in that they were either arrangements of already existing songs and dances, or original material treated in the same fashion, e.g. theme with accompaniment with a strong emphasis on modality. A comparison of Holst's output in different genres shows that Sāvitri is practically unique in that its music is not folk-inspired and almost always avoids such a suggestion. It relies most strongly on counterpoint, and it is not confined to one particular kind of harmonic language. It is fascinating to think that such a work blossomed at the height of the folk song movement in which Holst was deeply involved, as were so many of his contemporaries.
Holst's developmental path from 1900 to 1909 was possibly the most fruitful with regard to the establishment of his mature style. It was a relatively short span of time for him to progress from a Wagnerite who revelled in complicated chromaticism to a composer who had finally found his voice by assimilating all his earlier influences and producing something uniquely his own, rather than suffering under the yoke of an alien idiom. He was able to take the aspects that were of use to him from the Wagnerian approach—the idea of leitmotif, dramatic gesture in ensemble writing, for example—and balance them with his own special elements, such as musically maintaining the natural flow of the text, and minimal ensemble that enhanced the dramatic presence of the voice. Recognisable Holstian traits came into play now: from the uncertain trials in *Sita* during the early years, through the success in miniature form of the nine songs of op 24 came the now calm and confident application of the unseen chorus, the pedal point that helped to maintain dramatic intensity as well as his particular brand of harmony and modal writing, the latter of which he mastered through his investigation of folk songs.

The vast majority of Holst's non-operatic output during this period consisted of vocal music (both solo voice with accompaniment and choral, accompanied and *a cappella*) along with a minimal amount of chamber music. If not working on operatic projects his thinking was on a smaller scale but still focussing on the expressive power of the human voice. Ensemble music appeared only sporadically at this time, as a look through a list of his compositions will testify. Works on a larger scale such as *The Mystic Trumpeter* composed very early in the century still displayed the trademark of nineteenth-century thinking, whereas *A Somerset Rhapsody* (1906-7) was a purely instrumental arrangement of songs, the result of Holst's folk song period during
which he set many traditional melodies to his ever more recognisable harmonic idiom, influenced by their modal turns of phrase. Many of these folk song settings appeared around the time that *Sita* was nearing completion. It is likely that this accounts to some significant extent for the change in harmonic treatment of the materials in Act III of *Sita* and the extraordinary language of the *Vedic Hymns*.

Another thirteen years passed before Holst completed his next opera. In the meantime his focus was mainly on other genres, particularly ensemble music, and he continued to compose vocal music for his Paulinas to sing. *The Planets* was produced during the years of the First World War after which Holst found himself to be a famous composer and much sought-after conductor, to his great consternation.

However, by the time *The Perfect Fool* was completed in 1922 (having been begun in 1918) Holst’s interests had taken a different turn from those of the early years of the century; Sanskrit texts no longer stimulated new works (the last “Sanskrit” work having been *The Cloud Messenger* of 1912), although the teachings he had learned from the *Bhāgavād-Gītā* remained with him for the rest of his life. His interest in astrology—harbinger of *The Planets*—had waxed and waned. Europe was never to be the same again after 1918 and Holst had returned from service with the troops in Salonica in 1918 undoubtedly a changed man. The new world order affected the way he composed from that time on, and the remaining operas were of an entirely different spirit, inspired by quite different sources. The mature Holstian sense of humour was about to make its operatic mark.
7. A New Direction: 
Comedy and Parody after World War I

The trauma that shook the world in the form of the 1914-1918 war inevitably made an indelible imprint on the daily life of European society. Art, which has always mirrored the strengths and illnesses of any social order, was bound to reflect this disturbance. As with the psychology of individuals, the collective human psyche rallied to its own defence by creating a kind of survival mechanism to deal with the situation, and it did so in several ways in the world of music.

Just before the war four distinct new styles were emerging which happened to coincide: those of Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky (the three most significant styles in Europe since Debussy), and jazz. For example, 1911 was the year of Allegro barbaro, and Petrushka; 1912 saw the first performance of Pierrot Lunaire, and was also the year of Berg’s Altenberg Lieder. The Rite of Spring and Jeux had their first performances in 1913. It was at about this time that New Orleans jazz was finally being heard in New York and the blues were first published. These developments in themselves were enough to cause a rift between the old order and the new; the gap was further widened due to the deaths of three key figures who had clear links with the Romantic past: Mahler in 1911, Reger in 1916, and Debussy in 1918 (although Debussy was able to experience and be inspired by what became American jazz, Paris having become its European centre during the war). After World War I these styles remained distinct and continued to develop. Music seemed to be rejecting its recent past and embracing the new. The music of Stravinsky and Ravel, for example, evolved into a neo-classical style that attempted to avoid any subjective emotion and
treated music as abstract sonorities. "Their attitude, in short, was the perfect antithesis of romanticism and the German metaphysical view of music closely bound up with it that had dominated the great bulk of European music since Beethoven" (Abraham, p 277).

The vigour and fundamental joy embodied by the flexible rhythms and improvisatory nature of jazz had a therapeutic effect on war-weary European society. One of the legacies left behind by the experience of the Great War was that of neurasthenic exhaustion, a condition recognised by the medical profession, although shattered nerves were suffered not only by those who had actually experienced combat. Members of society as a whole, regardless of their circumstances, understood that "it was no simple matter to pick up where they had left off at the outset of the war" (Watkins, 2003, p 378). Music of a lighter nature or in a somewhat lively or humorous vein was able to provide curative powers. To this end another trend appeared which also helped to define this period: "a curious wave of sheer artistic silliness, of frantic desire for modernism at all cost" (Abraham, 1964, p 271) took hold of the collective imagination. This inclination toward "artistic silliness" was felt all over Europe, and many composers, by no means unimportant, were getting involved. The characteristics most accurately representing this post-war trend were epitomised in the work of "Les Six" as well as in that of Satie, Milhaud, and in certain works of Prokofiev, such as Love of Three Oranges,¹ to name but a few.

¹ Examples here have been chosen somewhat at random. The music of the post-World War I period is a wide-ranging area, and a thorough investigation is beyond the scope of this paper.
The general trend, as stated above, was that of the need to disassociate with the recent past that even went as far as the declaration that music had ended with Bach and had resumed with Stravinsky. In other words, there existed a kind of distrust of the highly-charged, emotional language characteristic of music of the pre-war period, almost as if composers were unable to deal with emotion and were turning to more light-hearted and humorous substance as a means of release. An interesting example of a typical attitude of the time appeared in a re-print of a lecture of Arthur Bliss:

Give me such works as Le Sacre du Printemps, L’Histoire du Soldat, the Sea Symphony and Savitri, The Eternal Rhythm and The Garden of Fand, the Ravel Trio and Falla’s Vida breve, L’Heure espagnole and the Five Pieces of Schönberg, and you can have all your Strauss Domestic and Alpine Symphonies, your Skryabin poems of earth, fire and water, your Schreker, your Bruckner and your Mahler.


Even though Bliss seems not to have bothered very much about which of the “modern” works were composed before or after the war, his comments exemplify the anti-Romantic feelings of the time. It may be safe to say that he chose these examples as being typical of their time as symbols of the “old” and the “new” orders, and therefore still a worthy comment, even if his chronology was not quite accurate.

The new artistic world order naturally had its effect on opera as well and comedy more frequently became the choice for subject material. “After the operatic preoccupation with heavy tragedy in the second half of the nineteenth century this is almost a new aesthetic ideal” (Jacobs, 1972, p 278).²

² It is important, however, to keep in mind that *Wozzeck*, for example, is a “heavy tragedy” which belongs to the early twentieth century.
Consequently, the next time that Gustav Holst (who had by now officially dropped the ‘von’ from his name to spare himself unnecessary suspicion and prejudice) was inspired to delve into the genre of opera he was living in quite a different world. Since the completion of *Sāvitrī* in 1909 Holst had put aside composition in the medium of opera for approximately a decade. Any of his works destined for the stage were limited to incidental music, notably for plays by Alice Buckton, James Masefield and Clifford Bax, as well as music for a ballet.\(^3\)

Although he was interested in the work of the great masters of the early twentieth century, Holst never fitted very neatly into any particular category; jazz did not impress him very much, but he certainly would have felt an affinity with the anti-Romantic ideal. He was, however, affected by the wave of light-hearted self-expression. During the third winter of the war Holst, with the help of his ‘Morleyites’, created a diversion which he described as “A new Spectacular Allegorical Music Drama, in Five Scenes and Six Languages (including Tonic Sol-Fa)” called *Opera as She is Wrote*. It was an entertaining distraction, a means of helping to alleviate the stress of wartime, and had to be rehearsed in the London underground during air raids (Holst, I., 1986, p 150). Its first informal performance took place on 9 March, 1918 at Morley College under Holst’s direction (Holst, I., 1974a, p 237). From surviving circumstantial evidence it was clearly meant as a parody on French, Italian and German opera. Only forty pages of fragmentary parts survive and a manuscript score probably never existed. Michael Short provides an enlightening description gleaned from the Morley College Magazine of February, 1918:

\(^3\) This was *The Lure* of 1921, with a scenario by Alice Barney.
The first five acts consisted of an English ballad opera by ‘Balface’, an Italianate offering entitled *Il Inspettore* by ‘Verdizetti’, a Wagnerian concoction involving the heroine ‘Screimhild [sic], impressionism in the style of ‘Depussy’, featuring ‘Paliasse’, and a Finale by ‘Horridinsky-Kantakoff’; the whole accompanied by ‘a vast orchestra’, with ‘five hidden choirs of mermaids, and a chorus of Italian brigands disguised as fir trees and food inspectors’. The sixth and final act, ‘before which the mind reels and staggers’, was to portray the Opera of the Future, and an advance announcement promised that ‘the scenery and lighting effects will be beyond words, even those of an N.C.O.’

Short, 1990, p 156

A significant aspect of this diversion is Holst’s radical change in attitude to opera, an ironic and humorous look at his early obsession with Wagnerian music drama, his break with it with his work on *Sävitrni*, and a wry commentary upon the existing styles of operatic writing. More importantly, *Opera as She is Wrote* paved the way for Holst’s next opera, another comedy entitled *The Perfect Fool*, op 39, which he began in 1918 and completed in 1922. However, *Opera as She is Wrote* is not, in itself, a composition of actual enduring value. It was conceived in the spirit of fun, a diversion during a time of great anxiety; sophistication of design, harmony, orchestration, vocal writing, etc., would have been the last thing on the mind of the Morleyites who participated. In fact, a major obstacle in considering this “opera” a creation of Holst at all is the fact that many others contributed music to it—a conglomeration of ideas within the satirical framework. Its destiny was later to serve as a catalyst with regard to ideas and musical material for the op 39.

Much of the (possibly best) material from *Opera as She is Wrote* was absorbed into *The Perfect Fool*, and the ballet which begins the opera was adapted from an earlier

---

4 The Morley College Magazine of February, 1918 announced the performance of the “Allegorical Music Drama”, and it was advertised as the “Annual Music Students’ Social”. There is no reference or allusion to it being a performance of a new composition by Holst.
work called *The Sneezing Charm*, the incidental music to a play by Clifford Bax from 1918 (7.1a, b and c).

Not surprisingly, the element of sorcery plays its part in *The Perfect Fool*; Holst retained his interest in mysticism over the years and one is reminded, for example, of the story line of *Lansdown Castle*. Among the various characters in *The Perfect Fool* there is a Wizard (baritone) who appears at the beginning, conjuring up the spirits of Earth, Fire and Water during the ballet that opens the work. The other characters are The Fool (a speaking part consisting of much yawning and the single word "No!" near the end), his Mother (contralto), the Princess (soprano), the Troubadour (tenor), the Traveller (bass), a Peasant (speaking), three Girls (sopranos), and the Troubadour's retainers (basses). In *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Reconsidered* Imogen Holst devotes a chapter to a relatively detailed description of the plot and the orchestral and vocal techniques—and inadequacies—of Holst's treatment. Holst discovered that he was not the librettist that he had hoped to be, remarking to his colleague Jane Joseph that "After trying for a long time I have taught myself to feel what is wanted in a libretto. But the libretto of the Fool needs a light touch, and I find I haven't one" (Holst, G., cited in Holst, I., 1986, p 150). It is in the passages that are meant to be humorous where Holst seems most self-conscious. Imogen Holst singles out several of these in the chapter mentioned above, and a glance through the score is enough to give an accurate impression. Holst interpolated spoken asides that are a rather pathetic attempt at humour, and which give the work an amateurish quality.

---

5 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 8.
6 Refer to *The Music of Holst* (1986), page 55 for more examples chosen by Imogen Holst of the spoken parts that she felt made the opera "unendurable".
The impression throughout is that he is trying too hard. When the Wizard is rehearsing his wooing song on the Mother (who is pretending to be the Princess) he is annoyed that she seems unable to look gentle and gracious, and he reprimands her with “Oh! Can’t you do better than that?” When she does not respond with enough admiration for his song he snaps “But why are you so stiff? That’s the great point of the song and you missed it!—We must go back and do it properly. Let me see, where was I? Oh yes!” This is but a taste of the artificiality of the humour, which seems forced throughout.

The premiere performance of *The Perfect Fool* was given on 14 May, 1923 at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, but Holst was unable to attend due to a visit to the United States. The result was not a success. The reaction to the opera was one of bewilderment; the audience was never entirely sure whether they were meant to laugh or not due to the weakness of the story and the feeble attempts at humour (as well as a lack of any programme notes by which to be guided). Many of the audience members left without really understanding the plot, and one critic remarked that “Mr. Gustav Holst, with all his unquestionable modesty, made an excellent advertisement for his opera in keeping the plot and the details a secret” (*Musical News & Herald*, June, 1923, p 211). The most successful portion of the work is the opening ballet, which sees the Wizard summoning the help of the Spirits and, through them, concocting his magic potion which will be the cause of the ensuing disorder. The entire ballet section was soon adopted by the concert hall as an orchestral piece in its own right (*sans Wizard, of course*), and has been in the concert repertoire ever since. The ballet music exists as well in arrangements for solo piano and also for two pianos. What was
understood from *The Perfect Fool*, however, was that Holst intended to satirize the world of opera. This is summarised succinctly by Michael Short,

This idea clearly stems from his Morley College entertainment *Opera as She is Wrote*, and its origins may even go back as far as the rejection of *Sita* by the Ricordi adjudicators and Holst’s subsequent discovery of a different kind of opera in *Sāvitrī*. The action, such as it is, turns on the inability or unwillingness of the Fool to take any interest in wooing a Princess, despite the promptings of his mother and competition from a Wizard, and in the final scene the Fool yawns and falls asleep from sheer apathy, to the consternation of everyone, not least the audience. Freed from the constraints of a more detailed synopsis, this sketchy outline enabled Holst to introduce parodies in the style of Wagner, Verdi and Debussy, and to include in his libretto banalities which make an audience feel uneasy as to whether they are to be taken seriously or not.

Short, 1990, p 211

If the plot is so inane, was there, then, some meaning or symbolism hidden within its pages? Was the Fool meant to represent Holst himself and the Princess the spirit of Opera being wooed by convention (the Troubadour who sings in the style of Verdi, the Wanderer who sings in the style of Wagner)? Neither of them is successful in winning the Princess except the Fool, but he shows no interest in her, preferring to go his own way. A theory was put forward in the press by Donald Tovey, a popular and oft-quoted observation that “it is permissible to wonder if, consciously or psycho-analytically, the title-role originally symbolized the British Public, impossible to awaken, but possessed of a charm which impels the Spirit of Opera (the Princess) to woo it in vain” (Tovey, 1923, p 465).

Unlike *Sāvitrī*, where the press tended to agree that the work was a masterpiece, although they were not able to agree whether it was quite mature Holst or not, there was extreme opposition with regard to *The Perfect Fool*. Tovey’s article, from which the above quotation is taken, had the unmistakably affirmative title “The Perfect
Fool'; or The Perfect Opera”. Despite claims by Imogen Holst and others of audience bewilderment, Tovey’s review asserted that the “crowded house showed no sign of yawning—though the Fool and a flute in the orchestra showed how beautifully that can be done”. He ended his review of the work with a most promising “What more auspicious opening of an operatic season could be imagined than this delightful piece, which renews the listener’s appetite for every kind of opera worthy of the arts of music and drama?” (Tovey, 1923, p 465).

Likewise, Edwin Evans had similar supportive things to say: “it is the man who treats theatrical precedent lightly who is most likely to produce something containing the spark of vitality. That is what Holst has done in The Perfect Fool” (Evans, 1923, p 389). He drew an interesting analogy to the opus 25 when he wrote,

...in Sâvitri he gave us a veritable gem of lyric-drama in a form which he would probably not have attempted had his adventurous spirit been inured to theatrical tradition. Again, in The Perfect Fool, he has given us old ingredients confectioned into a new dish of a kind that the theatrical expert would have regarded as courting disaster. And, like most things Holst attempts, it ‘comes off’.

Evans, 1923, p 389

At the opposite end of the scale there is Hugh Ottaway’s speculation that

If The Perfect Fool...is to be taken seriously as a satire on theatrical make-believe and operatic stock-in-trade, then it can only be regarded as curiously inept...It seems more likely that Holst embarked on the work in a spirit of diversion. Musically, he enjoyed himself, in the ‘serious’ business as well as in the Italian and Wagnerian parodies; but dramatically he blundered so heavily and so often that, considered as a stage proposition, this opera is beyond redemption.

Ottaway, 1974, p 473

Yet another writer, in discussing trends in the twentieth century, practically dismissed the work, even as a proper parody:
...The Perfect Fool...parodies nearly every style of operatic writing and even Holst's own although I am not sure that this was an intentional parody. Anyhow, the best thing in the whole work is the opening ballet movement, where he uses septuple rhythm to great effect. Generally speaking, one would regard this work as a waste of time in its composing and of money in its production. It was a good joke—once—but an expensive one.

Demuth, 1952, pp 140-41

It is too harsh to dismiss The Perfect Fool so completely. While it lacks the erudition of the later comedies (and, indeed, the genius of Savitri) it is nevertheless a testament to his sense of humour (even though the parodies in the libretto display a sort of clumsiness in representing that humour). As well, it demonstrates once again his ever present gift for identifying the potential of good themes and using them in new contexts where they will be more effective (one example being the early unpublished song The Day of the Lord whose piano accompaniment—with certain subtle alteration—went on to become the superb Maruts (Stormclouds) from the Vedic Hymns).

As most writers tend to agree, the opening ballet sequence is very satisfying as a concert piece in its own right, but most fail to realise that it is an exciting and effective opening for the opera itself. It evokes the atmosphere and lays the foundation for the story. Holst made minor adaptations to the ballet music when arranging it for concert performance (partly to compensate for the lack of the Wizard's unaccompanied moments). However, each of the main sections, Spirits of Earth, Spirits of Water, Spirits of Fire, are the same in both versions (7.2). Reminiscent of masterpieces like The Planets is Holst's use of 7/8 time—one of the elements identified with his development in the earlier years of the century. Other outstanding characteristics are the ostinati which lend rhythmic energy (the use of
which has been partially attributed by some to the composer’s neuritis\(^7\) as well as the prevalence of parallel perfect fourths. With regard to the orchestra, the size of the ensemble is more modest than that of *The Planets* but it is just as astute and as colourful.

Mother enters, dragging her son (the Fool) behind her and makes a crucial pronouncement that directs the course of the action, a prediction made when her son was born: “He wins a bride with a glance of his eye: With a look he kills a foe. He achieves where others fail, with one word”. To focus the listener’s attention on the words the strings sustain a high D that continues throughout most of the scene. On “Word” appears the first chord, a curious ninth chord consisting of Bb, D (the pedal), F, Ab, and C# (7.3). There is no particular reason to have a chord on “Word” except to emphasise it and cause us to wonder what this word could be. Her line is similar to that of Death in *Sāvitri* in that it is tonally ambiguous, but in this case we have D as a kind of anchor. With the presence of the D she wonders (partly in song, and partly speaking) how a fool like her son could possibly fulfil such a lofty prophecy. “Word” is always accompanied by the same chord. This chord remains important throughout and is associated with the Fool.

Themes from the ballet music have further roles to play: the Wizard’s first angry confrontation with Mother is accompanied by an ostinato taken from the Dance of the Spirits of Earth and a theme from Spirits of Fire. When he shows the potion that he has just concocted but not yet drunk to Mother and explains its purpose and effect the

---

\(^7\) It has often been suggested that the painful neuritis was the reason for Holst’s use of ostinati. As John Warrack put it, “the conventional sign to repeat the previous bar was a godsend to him”. However, it is important to remember that “he would not have over-indulged the habit if it had not first been present in his idiom” (Warrack, 1974, p 734).
gentle waves of the Spirits of Water theme is used in the high strings. The idea of love and longing is also accompanied by this theme, and anger by elements of the Fire theme.

The Wizard introduces another prophecy that involves the Princess for whom he is waiting (and for whom he has concocted his love potion), who is coming that day to choose a husband. He informs Mother that “She [the Princess] shall marry the man who does the deed no other can do” (7.4). The Wizard is convinced that it is he, and as he describes his plans (spoken) to win the love of the Princess to Mother the “Water” theme is heard in the background (“water” implying the potion). More displays of anger, as he describes what he will do to anyone standing in his way, bring back suggestions of the “Fire” theme.

At this point the main characters (minus the Princess) have been introduced, and the plot set in motion. Holst has used a minimal number of musical ideas so far, much of it traceable to the ballet music; there is far more spoken dialogue interspersed with the singing and it is highlighted by either silence from the instrumental ensemble or heard against a background pedal (usually D). As in Sāvitrī the ensemble can “comment” on a dramatic moment using an already established theme in spite of what the singer is singing. Tempers die down (as does the music) and the Wizard intends to rehearse his wooing song; the D pedal re-establishes itself. This, along with string passages in parallel fourths and minimal accompaniment from the ensemble make for the unmistakable Holstian sound (7.5).
The Wizard’s “rehearsal” is an interesting example of monotony in the music reflecting a similar situation in the plot. A new pedal note, this time C, changes the musical “anchor”, and the Wizard’s mixolydian song is centred strongly on C (his highest and lowest points reaching C). He is quite obviously pretentious, repetitive and annoying as Mother comments verbally on his lofty nonsense. In true Holstian fashion the ensemble is silent throughout but for that pedal note. A sudden shift to F sharp as the central note along with a quickening of the tempo intensifies the atmosphere and ends the sense of inertia.

As the drama proceeds it becomes clear that, again like Sāvitrī, the music moves in an endless flow and, strictly speaking, there are no arias. Except for the opening ballet, the music has followed and commented upon the action, and the effect is of one long recitative, especially with the predominance of the spoken word.

From a distance, three girls approach a well to fill their pitchers with water giving Mother the idea to steal the potion from the now sleeping Wizard, administer it to her son, leaving water in its place for the unsuspecting Wizard. The girls sing an unaccompanied round (7.6), “the most successful part of the whole opera” according to Imogen Holst, who described it as “a rare moment of lyrical beauty” (Holst, I., 1986, p 55). Dramatically speaking, the three girls’ part in the story has been accomplished and they leave the stage singing the same round (now beginning on Eb) until they are no longer heard (shades of Sāvitrī and Neptune); they do not reappear in the story. Claiming that this is the most successful part of the whole opera is a somewhat harsh judgement. The ballet makes a very impressive opening to the work.
as the mystical element is set in motion, and the orchestra presents the fundamental themes of the work interacting with the Wizard who summons both the music, and therefore the dancers, to begin. The ending is also effective: a great procession during which the Fool falls asleep just as he is about to be crowned (accompanied by commentary from the woodwinds, harp and muted brass) followed by the sudden falling of the curtain to a magnificent tutti chord. There are weaknesses with the plot, among other things, which affected how the opera was received, but the opening ballet music survives as a concert piece in its own right due to its balance of energy and sentimentalism, expressed through stunning orchestration.

The instrumental interlude that follows serves as background for Mother’s glee for having appropriated the potion for the Fool. The “Princess” theme is heard which both emphasises her plans for her son as well as forecasting the arrival of the Princess who is heralded by a trumpet fanfare followed by the entrance of her entourage. This is the grandest affair in the opera so far and Holst uses all the instrumental forces at his command. The free-flowing effect of the music had been achieved by parlante singing over pedals and by frequent changes of metre. Another favoured Holstian device now makes its appearance and succeeds in the same effect, namely that of hemiola (7.7) The trumpet fanfare also reappears and is treated to diminution and combined with the hemiola to produce a fascinating texture, a sort of layering technique already used in the earlier operas (7.8).

The Princess is heard for the first time, and she utters another of the most important lines in the work, another prophecy that will play its part in the resolution of the story:

---

8 There is a more detailed discussion of the work later in this chapter.
“I must marry the man who does the deed no other can do” (7.9). The Wizard had already uttered this prophecy earlier, as he explained to Mother his plan of action when the Princess finally appears (refer to 7.4). Although the music for this theme in both cases is not identical in intervallic construction, the similarity is such that there is no mistaking their connection. In true Holstian fashion (reminiscent of his treatment of themes in Sāvitrī) he uses this theme during an instrumental interlude as a reminder to the listener of the Wizard’s telling of the prophecy earlier, and the above pronouncement by the Princess that is yet to come. This theme becomes associated with the Princess for the remainder of the opera.

Mother has awakened the Wizard who approaches the Princess as her first suitor. With characteristic cleverness and economy of musical material Holst uses an already memorable theme introduced now in a different context, similar to the way in which he gave Sāvitrī one of Satyavān’s themes near the end of the work. The theme associated with the Spirits of the Earth is now his own, accompanied by the engaging rhythm used during the ballet (7.10).

The Princess is repulsed by the Wizard’s look and manner but he, of course, believes that he will be transformed by the potion that will make her fall madly in love with him. He drinks from the cup (which is filled now with plain water) and begins his wooing song as rehearsed earlier—hence the return of the C pedal and the arioso passage we have heard before. The only change now is the lyrics, which display a ridiculous arrogance. She spurns him, and as his pleas grow more passionate he must deal with her courtiers who come forward to protect her. His anger rises and fragments of the “Fire” theme are heard in the ensemble. It will be recalled that earlier
in the work the “Fire” theme first heard in the ballet was used to represent anger. This theme continues as the Wizard realises that he has been tricked by the Fool’s mother. After being scorned by all he swears revenge, and his anger unleashes the full force of the “Fire” theme. The chorus are rather tired of him and, using a fragment of this theme, harass him with “You have said all this before, sir, can’t you sing us something new?” Not only is this part of the plot, but it may well be the composer making fun of his own abundant use of this theme. They continue to ridicule him with his own theme, after which he finally storms away.

As her entourage sing praises to the Princess with musical material stemming from the Wizard’s wooing song the singing Troubadour appears. Here is her second suitor, and Holst’s first operatic parody as the Troubadour sings an unmistakable aria in the style of Verdi (complete with typical accompaniment and vocal callisthenics), making this the first bona fide aria of the work (7.11a). Later the pair engage in a kind of contest to see whose voice is more agile, the Troubadour straining for his top notes (7.11b), and the Princess clearly the more accomplished. She tires of him and advises him with her coloratura song to go home and learn to sing better.

No sooner is he dispatched than the Traveller appears. The change in the style of the music is quite a shock and was meant to be so; for instead of the clear-cut harmonic progressions of the Italian style comes the parody of the chromaticism of the Wagnerian music drama that had once so captivated Holst (7.12). As Imogen Holst pointed out “the comedy reaches its highest level when the Princess refuses his proposal with the words: ‘But, Sir, I think we have heard this before’, to the tune of
Siegfried’s horn-call” (Holst, I., 1986, p 55) (7.13). As he protests, Holst again uses the full force of his instrumental ensemble, fortissimo, to drown him out.

Where is the Fool in all this? He is awakened by the Traveller who has stumbled over him and the first person he sees is the Princess. The spell works and, in Titania-like fashion, she is overcome with adoration for the Fool. As pointed out earlier, each of the main themes of the ballet are used throughout the work but have been transformed to symbolise something else, such as the “Fire” theme for the Wizard’s rage. The “Water” theme was used quite early on to represent love and longing, and now reappears as the Princess walks towards the Fool, the object of her affection. The theme is shared between the ensemble and then the voice (7.14). All the Fool can do is yawn despite his mother shaking him, and the flutes accompany his yawn with their usual arpeggio (7.15).

The Troubadour and the Traveller are both incredulous and each vow to rescue the Princess from her folly. Each time either sings the ensemble accompany with their appropriate style of music. They engage in a quarrel in which both vie for the upper hand. It is of interest to point out the Troubadour’s repetition of “she shall be mine” alternating with his retainers (“she shall be thine”)—this lasts for several pages of the score. This marvellously ludicrous effect was taken directly from Opera as She is Wrote wherein the “Verdizetti” character does precisely the same.

In what is certainly the weakest part of the opera with regard to continuity in the storyline comes the scene in which a peasant (a speaking part), clearly in panic, comes to
describe a horrible fire in the distance with weird demons dancing—he knows their land is doomed. It is a rather ineffective way of re-introducing the Wizard to the story, as his threats have now become reality. The only connection we have is, at the mention of fire, the “Fire” theme from the ballet reappears. Other than this very little use is made of familiar motifs and themes giving the effect of lack of musical direction. Everyone implores the Princess to leave but she is blissfully gazing at her beloved Fool and cares not for earthly matters. Mother realises that part of the prophecy has come true: “He has won a bride with a glance of his eye; with a look he kills a foe!” She sings it to the theme with which it was heard originally, albeit beginning on a different pitch (A flat instead of F). The approaching fire causes chaos during which one hears snatches of the “fire” theme. All are terrified (by now the stage is filled with refugees and villagers) except Mother and the Princess, who are convinced that the Fool has the power to save them. The orchestra is dominated by panicked music, i.e. rushing descending and ascending scales, tremolo and the like. This section takes up a great deal of time, thereby weakening what little plot already exists. The music does not do much to validate what is happening. Many of the same lyrics are heard repeated, but this only results in stagnation. Close to the end of this section logic returns as the Wizard reappears accompanied by the Spirits of Fire whom he has summoned for revenge. Their theme is abundantly clear now as everyone runs away leaving only the Princess, the Wizard, the Fool and his Mother. She forces the Wizard to stare at the flames as a result of which the flames turn on him and he is engulfed. The fire dies down as the Spirits of Fire go off, thus making
another part of the prophecy come true: Mother sings the theme again: “...with a look he has killed a foe!” The people return anxiously to find out what has happened; the chorus here is *a cappella* as each part has its own different lyrics and the parts are organised in such a way as to overlap with each other giving the effect of disorder and confusion.

In order to restore the calm after the panic and commotion Holst returns to the use of his beloved pedal as background for the Princess and her reproach to the people for abandoning her, no-one remaining to protect their sovereign. The theme is not recognisable as anything used previously in the work. She calls the people fools and cowards, saying that only the Fool remained with her during the catastrophe. She turns to ask him the most important question heard against what might be called the “love” theme (7.16). She implores the Fool for an answer until he utters the one and only word he has in the entire work: “NO!” Holst uses the dissonant ninth chord heard near the beginning when Mother sang “he achieves where others fail with one word”. The chord on “word” and the chord on “no!” are one and the same: the word in the prophecy is the word “no” and Holst links them by means of the same harmony. For, as Mother states, “he is the only man who has ever looked in your face and not loved you!” General merriment ensues as everyone realises that the mysterious and ancient legends have now been revealed. Priests enter with a crown and as the Fool is about to be crowned he yawns, yawns again and then falls asleep. Three bars later a *tutti* chord announces the end of the work and the curtain falls.
The Perfect Fool is a work that causes a great deal of frustration. It shows promise, certainly at the beginning, and the operatic parodies are gems in their own right. Many of the Holstian touches reveal his great lyrical sensitivity. Yet there is a sense that he was uncomfortable with comedy at this stage, even though the situation improved in the coming years. The construction was rather predictable much of the time, relying mainly on the ballet themes to symbolise different characters and states of emotion, but not much more; he was unable for some reason to apply all that he had accomplished in Savitri in which the constant interweaving of very specific leitmotifs held the work together with such sophistication. Discomfort with the subject material and the quality of his libretto may have contributed to this. There are certain elements of the story which do not make sense (such as the crowning of the Fool) and it must have been moments such as these that confused audiences at the premiere as to what was supposed to be humorous and what was not. Nevertheless, there were glimmers of light in this somewhat dark tunnel of an opera, and the light was about to intensify. He may not have been totally at ease with this opera but in style it was finally the mature Holst at work. The use of instruments such as the celeste contribute an "otherworldly" effect, and Holstian fingerprints now abound: rhythmically engaging ostinati, oscillating open fifth and fourth intervals and the use of unusual metres such as 7/8.

In spite of the dubious success of The Perfect Fool Holst was determined to stay with comic subject matter for the final two operas. Imogen Holst began her discussion of her father's next opera by saying "As it happened, the next work he wrote was condemned by nearly everyone who heard it" (Holst, I., 1986, p 67). The musical interlude in one act called At the Boar's Head had a curious beginning.

Holst described this as 'an opera that wrote itself'. In interviews to the press, between rehearsals for the first performance at Manchester in the
spring of 1925, he mentioned how the idea had come to him. 'I was reading Henry IV when suddenly some of Falstaff’s speeches began to go to Playford’s old tunes, and, as the weather was very bad, just for something to do I wrote down all the Falstaff speeches and all the Pistol speeches that went to the tunes. Later on, the thing insisted on being taken more seriously, and this is the result.'

Holst, G. cited in Holst, I., 1974a, p 156

Novello’s vocal score lists the tunes that Holst used in At the Boar’s Head, op 42: twenty-eight country dance tunes from Playford’s English Dancing Master (1651), four morris tunes (Cecil Sharp’s edition of Morris Dance Tunes), one traditional dance from Sharp’s editions of Country Dance Tunes, three ballads from Chappell’s History of Popular Music in England (first edition), and two folksongs from Gardiner’s private manuscript collection (given personally to Holst). There are only three original tunes in the entire work. The required ensemble is quite basic and somewhat small: one piccolo, one flute, one oboe, one cor anglais, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, tuba or euphonium, strings and timpani.

The problem of conflicting opinions about At the Boar’s Head has to do with the element of ingenuity versus the idea of the “traditional” structure of an opera. As an intellectual exercise, the combination of specifically chosen text with pre-existing traditional melodies is highly impressive. However, there is a drawback regarding performance in that, due to its very nature, possibly only few members of an audience could really understand the technique. If the tunes heard were not all well known, for example, the counterpoint used and the setting of the text to the tunes would not be fully appreciated. If the folk songs were easily recognisable, it is likely that attention would be drawn to the tunes rather than to the opera as a whole. If Shakespeare’s words were to dominate, the music would be in danger of serving only as a sonic
backdrop to the action. Both situations would thereby undermine the synthesis of words and music that is the core of an opera. Overall, *At the Boar’s Head* uses the leitmotif element to a lesser extent—one which serves so well to clarify or foretell situations, and symbolise specific characters or ideals.

*At the Boar’s Head* is a testament to English culture, due both to the indigenous melodies and Shakespeare’s text. The fact that it has not been adopted into the regular repertoire of English opera is somewhat disappointing, however the work does have its weaknesses (see note 9). Were it part of English musical culture however, it is questionable whether the work would “travel” well to other countries to become part of the repertoire of international opera companies; it is possibly too specifically “English” and would lose much in translation, as well as the lack of knowledge of the tunes used in the work. As it stands today, *At the Boar’s Head* is a rather specifically English treat; it deserves to be heard and seen, but to be taken in a spirit of fun, much in the way its creator viewed it.

An examination of a work conceived in such an unusual way requires a slightly different approach from that taken so far with the other operas. Themes cannot be analysed for their Holstian characteristics since we know that he has made use of already existing tunes (apart from three). His strength as a librettist can be assessed according to how well he joins these disparate scenes chosen from the plays. A list of

---

9 The storyline does suffer, in fact, in that one experiences a very superficial and limited re-telling of the narrative; it naturally lacks the depth and the intricacies of the plays in their entirety. Those who do not know *Henry IV* well enough will find the plot quite thin compared with, say, *Sāvitrī*, *Sīta* or *The Wandering Scholar*. 
the songs and dances used, and where they occur in the score is readily available in the edition itself.

The opera begins with one of Holst’s trademark effects of voices heard without the singers being seen. Unlike Sāvitrī, where there is no curtain and the singer is heard off-stage, Bardolph is on stage when he begins his unaccompanied song\(^\text{10}\), but the curtain has not yet risen. When Peto and Gadshill join him, they are well into their (still unaccompanied) revelry by the time the curtain is raised to reveal an upper room in The Boar’s Head Tavern, Eastcheap, in the later afternoon. Even Falstaff is first heard offstage demanding a cup of sack; shortly he enters as the instrumental ensemble begins, echoing his opening phrase. This echoing of a vocal line in the ensemble shows evidence of Holstian “fingerprints”.

Holst found it important to “manipulate” the listener’s musical memory by reintroducing themes already heard that symbolised certain characters or states of mind (witness, again, Sāvitrī). In Boar’s Head he continues with this technique to a certain extent; for example, the ensemble is given a tune that Falstaff sang in his opening moments (with slight modification) while Prince Hal’s vocal line carries on with something new. In this way the instruments ensure a reminder of Falstaff’s presence in the heated conversation of the moment (7.17).

Even though the greater portion of themes are not original there are several ways in which Holst deals with his folksongs and dances which manage to achieve a kind of

---

\(^{10}\) “Of All the Birds that Ever I See” is an anonymous drinking song from Chappell’s collection. It is not used in the play.
unity throughout much of the work. An example has been mentioned above: the use of echo in the ensemble which reinforces a character, or a situation in which a character finds himself. Falstaff’s companions Bardolph, Peto and Gadshill sing his opening line using the same musical fragment, although in the play they do not repeat Falstaff’s line in this manner. It is Holst’s way of establishing the personalities of Shakespeare’s characters for the listener (7.18a).

It is possible that Holst gave precedence to the text, and when presenting words that have already been heard, uses the accompanying tune again as a kind of reinforcement (7.18b). This last example can be found several times and has become associated with the drinking of sack; when Hal later sings of drinking the ensemble gives its supporting commentary (7.18c). The use of chosen melodies as “commentary” can also highlight the dramatic element, such as characters who sing senza misura on one pitch for the purpose of presenting information which is important to the development of the drama. Here, Old Noll’s Jig and The Night Piece are used alternately in such a situation, even when the vocal part moves away momentarily from its single note (7.18d).

The use of returning to a theme or motif to remind the listener of what has gone before is very effective; however there occur many instances of themes that are introduced in part or in more complete form, which one will have grasped before hearing it in the vocal part (7.18e, f and g).

Many songs or dances have interesting melodic features that do not necessarily occur at the beginning of the tune; Holst sometimes exploits these more than once, possibly
knowing that they will be memorable (7.18h). This latter example also demonstrates his penchant for manipulating the time values, such as the use of augmentation here.

*Lady in the Dark* is associated with Doll Tearsheet and is used earlier in the opera when we first encounter her as a more sentimental aspect to the story. A very subtle nod toward this tune is heard much closer to the end when she is singing again—a simple three-note fragment (7.18i).

The military aspect is also represented and Holst chose *The Queen’s Birthday* and *Jenny come tie* for marches played by the orchestra. The call to arms is depicted in the actions on stage and the complementary vocal parts (7.18j). Holst does not lose another opportunity for using offstage singing voices: the soldiers that have come for the Prince are heard singing *Lord Willoughby*. The onstage singers join in this rousing, patriotic song with a very Holstian treading bass accompaniment (7.18k). When the Prince joins the troops the orchestra marches return, only to fade into the distance with a simple *diminuendo poco a poco*.

With a wealth of indigenous music available to him Holst still felt the need to use three of his own tunes. It is too simplistic an explanation that he wished to use certain texts and could not find appropriate tunes for them, therefore he composed his own; the whole point was to put pre-existing text together with pre-existing melody. It indicates that these moments in the drama call for something more introspective than a folksong, and that Holst would provide for these musical moments.
The first occurs at rehearsal 27 when all exit the stage except for the Prince, who sings the final monologue from the second scene of the first act. This interesting insertion has been immediately preceded and followed by material from the second act. Holst felt a need to include this contemplative moment of the play in his opera, and chose to set it to a lyrical melody that reflects the on stage stillness and the nature of the words (7.19). Its meditative character is achieved by the senza misura vocal line and the orchestral chords which are sustained and change only occasionally for the sake of musical colour. The effect is that of music from a different work altogether and it thereby throws the moment into relief. Holst achieves a similar effect for Prince Hal with “Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion’s paws…” a sonnet which also has an introspective quality; the sound is once again pure Holst and, regardless of the time signatures, manages an almost improvisatory quality (7.20). This is an interesting moment of the story since the nature of Hal’s song makes Falstaff impatient and he tries to interrupt with a robust When Arthur first in court began/And was approved king. Each wishes to continue his song and Holst here displays his stunning counterpoint as the old ballad and original tune continue together, each maintaining their starkly different characteristics.

The final use of an original tune is saved for Pistol, who begins with a line Si fortune me tormente, sperato me contento (7.21). This, plus the next few lines (which are in English) forms the basis for a round between him and his two companions. Holst

11 This is the ballad Sir Launcelot du Lake. In the play Falstaff only manages one (incorrect) line of the song. Holst here has included all of it. He sets it to the tune Chevy Chase which was the melody to which this was usually sung in Shakespeare’s day.

12 This is a curious line that does not “fit” exactly into either Italian or Spanish. According to the commentary of Peter Davison, “Which language Pistol thinks he is speaking is uncertain. It is closest to Italian, though...Spanish would be expected. He means ‘If fortune torments me, hope contents me.’” (Davison p 196).
gives them the lines as well, and the three launch into an unaccompanied round in a hearty F major. The nature of this original tune is in stark contrast to the previous two, but the dramatic situation is different, and Holst’s purpose was to explore the possibilities of a round, rather than simply to set some text to a folk melody. The last of the three original tunes “fits” the nature of much of the music that has preceded and which will follow, but the monologues sung by Hal are illuminated by the contrasting nature of the music. None of these three themes is used anywhere else in the opera.

This last point brings about the issue of cohesive organisation of *At the Boar’s Head*. Unlike *Sävitri* throughout which a more limited number of themes are used to their maximum capacity in order to bring all of its aspects together in a unified whole (including the incredible ending in which several of the opening themes are repeated or transformed as befits their role in the resolution of the drama), *Boar’s Head*—for all its originality of design—has a rather loose construction owing to the large number of different tunes used. There is not enough time or libretto in this one-act opera in order to probe various aspects of the music, and Holst has had to confine his musical explorations to smaller sections of the work. Almost none of the tunes used (such as the ones in the examples above) are ever heard beyond their first presentation even though melodic fragments or rhythms may be extracted to support the vocal parts of the current scene. *At the Boar’s Head* was founded upon an extremely clever premise but would not work as a general structural principle for the construction of opera.

Holst demonstrates considerable restraint with his ensemble by not allowing it to overwhelm the singers, whether it be a solo voice or a more intricate mesh of several, the counterpoint of which would be hidden. Sudden moments of unaccompanied song
draw the attention to the voice (7.22) To keep the effect simple vocal parts are doubled in the ensemble to keep the effect of folksong, rather than the more "intellectual" sound of intricate counterpoint—something Holst seemed to prefer at crucial moments in Savitri. Pedal notes (either sustained tones or string tremolo) are used to highlight certain moments, and heavier textures such as chords are often built from open fourths or fifths (7.23 a and b). As will be recalled, these are among the elements that Holst's music developed in the early years of the century and whereas before they were frequently used with a certain degree of subtlety, here the musical atmosphere is more rustic. These elements just described have all already occurred in this work by rehearsal number 3.

Changes in pitch for important themes, or changes of key have played their part in the past by underscoring certain developments in a story. Holst does not lose the opportunity in his comedy: “Falstaff’s demand for a cup of sack is enlivened by its violent change of key [from F major to Db] when he finds they have put lime in it” (Holst, I., 1986, p 67) (7.24).

It is likely that, because of Holst’s goal to set specific texts to specific tunes, he had no particular interest in inserting spoken passages into this work (although there are the occasional parlante sections), a feature that may possibly have been overdone in The Perfect Fool.

---

13 It would be preferable to guard against a term such as “violent” for a change from F to D flat. F belongs in the key of D flat, so the change would not be all that striking.
14 The final opera illustrates a fine balance between the two.
A relatively new characteristic appeared in Holst’s comic writing at this time: that of wide and angular intervals such as that used in the accompaniment to the last example, as well as in the following (7.25). This is, admittedly, a somewhat broad generalisation, but evidence exists in the operas of themes composed mainly of narrow intervals producing a sinister, sad or peaceful frame of mind (according to the dramatic circumstances), whereas wider ones give more extroverted and humorous impressions. Even in *The Planets* Holst had already put this into practice: compare the main themes of *Venus* or *Mars* with the opening bars of *Jupiter* and *Uranus* (although the latter displays humour of a more diabolical nature).

Imogen Holst made an interesting point about the two independent sources that Holst was trying to bring together.

> It was certainly a perilous undertaking. The words already conveyed everything that was needed in this richest of comedies, and the unaccompanied tunes were already complete in themselves. Bringing them together and trying to persuade them that they were meant for each other was a task which might have daunted anyone less obstinate than Holst.

Holst, I., 1986, p 67

From Shakespeare’s scenes at the Boar’s Head he chose the passages that he wanted to set to music and managed to join them so that there would be no break in the sense of the dialogue.\(^\text{15}\)

Holst must have recalled the great disappointment of his previous opera with regard to his own libretto; whether it was with humour or bitterness is not quite clear, but he wrote to W.G. Whittaker in September of 1924, “And as critics have decided that I

\(^{15}\) Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 9.
can’t write a libretto, the words of my new opera have been written by Shakespeare...” (Short, ed., 1974, p 86). The 1925 premiere elicited a suspicious response; Imogen Holst theorised that the audience felt cheated because so few original tunes were used, and critics\textsuperscript{16} “tried to be polite, saying that it was ‘an extremely interesting experiment’, and ‘a miracle of ingenuity’, though one of them insisted that it was ‘pathetic to see such fine musicianship so ill employed’. On the whole, the work was considered ‘a brilliant failure’” (Holst, I., 1982, p 322). Another source, an overview of the emancipation of English music, saw it as “a masterpiece of dexterity, but no opera” (Howes, 1966, p 244).\textsuperscript{17}

As is to be expected, views differed on Holst’s achievement with \textit{At the Boar’s Head}. Edmund Rubbra, while not devoting too many words on the subject, described it as “a \textit{tour de force} in the handling of English folk music”. He spoke of the combination of “elaborate counterpoints” and stated unequivocally that “the score is a miracle of ingenuity in the way the whole texture is woven out of these folk-song elements” (Rubbra, 1947, pp 42-43). Donald J. Grout dismissed the public reaction to the work, calling it

\begin{quote}
...a Shakespearian intermezzo with words from Henry IV, a jolly work made up largely of traditional English tunes, somewhat in the manner of a ballad opera. The influence of these works is not to be reckoned so much by their outward success as by the fact that they represent the serious, original and uncompromising efforts of a first-rank English composer in the restricted and rather thankless field of native opera.

Grout, 1988, p 688
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Imogen Holst does not specify the sources of these remarks, although “miracle of ingenuity” has been traced to Edmund Rubbra.

\textsuperscript{17} This same author states that, with regard to \textit{The Perfect Fool}, “the splendid ballet music... is all that survives”, however the complete MS score is part of the British Library music collection and can be easily accessed. There is also a published vocal score.
A look back at Holst’s work during his centenary year of 1974 brought out an interesting comparison between *Boar’s Head* and *The Perfect Fool* with respect to Holst’s ingenuity as an opera composer.

Considered in cold blood, the idea of lifting the Boar’s Head scenes from their context and setting them to folk-tunes is even more bizarre than that of the yawning Fool who utters only one word. What is surprising is not that the work is less than completely satisfactory but that it comes off so well. All but three of the tunes are traditional, and there is great resourcefulness and flexibility in Holst’s treatment of them.

Ottaway, 1974, p 474

As is already in evidence above, critics and writers on music seemed to agree on the creativity shown in Holst’s writing (even though the initial idea may have been somewhat suspect).

[The tunes] are welded together seamlessly and, given Holst’s characteristic harmonic and orchestral setting, are made totally his own and stylistically all of a piece...Indeed, it is probably its unrelenting, chattery style and overt ‘cleverness’ that have kept it from the stage for much of its life.

Rye, 1995, pp 349-50

An article written close to the time that the work was premiered had a positive view of Holst’s contribution to the future of English opera and its potential for individuality, putting him in context with his contemporaries:

Nothing is more promising than the way in which Mr. Holst, Dr. Vaughan Williams and Mr. Rutland Boughton have begun their careers as composers of opera. For they have avoided the worst pitfall—imitation. There is nothing to connect “The Perfect Fool,” “Hugh the Drover,” “The Immortal Hour” or “At the Boar’s Head” with German, French or Italian opera.

Bonavia, 1926, p 275
Despite what some audiences may have thought of the work, these rather glowing reports call into question Imogen Holst’s explicit statement that the opera was “condemned by nearly everyone who heard it”.

*At the Boar’s Head,* an original work built upon an extremely clever hypothesis and executed with skill and sensitivity, is a fine example of most of the elements first presented in the earlier discussion of the *Vedic Hymns.* Key changes are frequent, providing the so-called shifting of colour of the musical fabric; pedals impart stillness to a moment of the drama in which characters can contemplate their situation, or they can provide change of momentum between more active scenes; chords in open fourths and fifths are prevalent and contribute to the more energetic and somewhat unrefined nature of the characters; the orchestration is restrained, not so much in a sophisticated way but in a simpler sense in that the featured folk tunes are usually doubled with rather simple accompaniment; frequent changes of metre (as is always the case with Holst) facilitates freedom of motion for the vocal line, thereby discouraging the tyranny of the downbeat; and, of course, modal melody in an opera based entirely on folk songs and dances. The only factor difficult to find in *Boar’s Head* which had become rather pervasive in Holst’s music is stepwise motion of the bass. Holst tends to follow the tunes and harmonise them accordingly, and they rarely accommodate this kind of motion. There are, of course, exceptions on a small scale (7.26).

The experiment of combining pre-existing text with pre-existing melodies was a scheme that Holst never attempted again. It is highly probable that, as with his interest
in astrology, for example, he made use of the idea to his satisfaction and was afterwards content to leave it in order to try something new.

Holst’s final foray into the world of opera was *The Wandering Scholar* op 30, which was completed in 1930. Holst was an avid reader and enjoyed the books of Helen Waddell; he was familiar with her work *The Wandering Scholars* and asked Clifford Bax to write a libretto based on *Le Pauvre Clerc*, one of the tales in the book. According to Michael Short this was “the first time that Holst had collaborated with a librettist rather than writing or adapting the words himself” (Short, 1990, p 267). Holst was able to meet Helen Waddell, and *The Wandering Scholar* was dedicated to her.

Again Holst remained true to his preferred one-act chamber opera form in bringing to life this little French folk-tale, set in the kitchen of a farmhouse on an April afternoon in the thirteenth century. It was premiered in Liverpool on 31 January, 1934, a few months before Holst’s death; he was already too ill to attend the performance and died before he could make any of his planned revisions to the score. He had left copious notes in the margins regarding possible changes to many aspects of the work, and in 1971 Imogen Holst and Benjamin Britten studied the manuscript carefully, fulfilling Holst’s wishes as best they could. They edited the full score as well as a study score, and the work was finally published by Faber.

---

18 This curious statement does not take into account Holst’s early days at the Royal College of Music where he worked with Fritz Hart.
In keeping with the setting of the story, the music tends towards tunes that are folk-song in nature, but there is a sophistication about it that can be traced back to Sāvitrī, namely the use of certain signature motifs that elucidate the drama. As Short usefully summarises:

Words are set to folk-like tunes with an ease that stems from At the Boar’s Head, but this folksy aspect is not overdone, and the musical material is always appropriate to the dramatic situation. The accompaniment is simple, and the musical material economical but effective, being held together by the recurrence of a ‘signature’ motif which imparts its character to many of the vocal lines. There is no overture—only a few introductory bars, and the opera ends with an abruptness which took its first audiences by surprise.

Short, 1990, p 268

The musical coherence that this opera displays stems mainly from the opening seven bars, plus only a small number of themes, which are presented near the beginning. The opening phrase provides a dual function: that of brief overture as well as furnishing the opera with what is probably its most important theme (7.27). As was discussed earlier, the awkward, angular shape foretells a light-hearted comic setting. Holst’s versatile use of the theme provides different moods that reflect the action while musically unifying the whole. Often, as in Sāvitrī, the theme (or recognizable elements extracted from it—in this case, the fourths intervals) is heard in the instrumental background while the voices sing contrasting material against it. Other themes that are introduced and appear throughout include Louis’ first song (7.28) which is used much later in the ensemble to indicate that he is returning home, a theme that foretells the secret meeting (7.31), and one that Pierre uses to tell his fabricated tale to Louis and Alison (7.40). Pierre is given this last theme only while

---

19 Refer to volume 2, Appendix III, synopsis 10.
telling this tale; it is not used in any other context throughout the opera. Neither does Holst use any of his earlier music during which Pierre tells his own story while begging for some supper. It is most likely that the composer wished to preserve the scholar’s themes, keeping them unique within the piece.

At the beginning, after an upward climb of melodic fourth intervals the final note of this phrase is sustained to form the first pedal against which Louis sings his opening aria (728). Unlike most other Holst operatic works which support the idea of the endless flow of music, this is a proper aria and is fitting in this instance, for it sets up an atmosphere that is unmistakably that of folk music, that is, a strophic song in compound duple time whose focus is nature and the singer’s part in it. Again, Holst directs our attention to the solo voice by keeping the accompaniment to a minimum. The doubling of the melody by the winds is reminiscent of the treatment of the folk melodies in *At the Boar’s Head*. Alison’s first utterance is based on the opening theme (7.29). The almost exclusive use of the opening music as well as the climbing fourths idea (7.30) already give the work a sense of cohesion that was sorely lacking in *The Perfect Fool*. An interlude is heard as Louis leaves for town; again, it is his theme being shared among the instruments. The entire opening scene, which establishes the situation, has been successfully constructed from an absolute minimum of musical materials.

The music that has become so familiar even in the first few pages suddenly disappears as Alison, now alone, longs for the visit of her “dear fat Father Philippe”. A crucial turning point in the story, Holst again uses *parlante* style singing against a pedal to focus attention on the developments. As she prepares food for his clandestine visit a
new theme is indicated, but will not be played in full for another eight bars (7.31). This is, of course, significant in that Holst used the same technique in Savitri to foretell the arrival of Satyavan.

A section of quite expressive beauty follows as Alison sings of her yearning in the springtime. This is Holst the lyricist, quite apart from the pseudo folk-song composer (7.32). Music such as this makes one wonder at a review of the opera which claimed that “its absence from the stage is perhaps understandable; lasting barely half an hour and surprisingly astringent in musical style, it offers few lyrical possibilities” (Smaczny, 1986, p 102).

As her song is ending obtrusive major third intervals in the low strings appear; again it is the indication of something or someone new—a simple musical device which works admirably. In this case it is the long-awaited Father Philippe. His theme in greeting Alison consists, of course, mainly of the major thirds (7.33) The low strings are featured here, most likely to portray a large, portly man.

The theme of example 7.31 is now heard full force by the woodwinds, as the Father sings of the good cheer they are able to share while Louis is not home. From this point on this theme represents their secret meeting (7.34).

While the dinner is cooking, the two try to think of a “pastime” that might occupy them. A sudden change of key brings on this new development (although the implication is that these meetings have been a regular occurrence). Their discussion takes on the form of a recitative with very little accompaniment which is a prominent
feature of the work thus far. The “secret meeting” theme dominates most of this section and, again, provides consistency. Another abrupt change—in this case, clashing semitones in the horns—brings their carousing to a hasty end as Alison hears someone coming (7.35). The use of the horns here is a fine example of changes of colour which have an impact on the drama because they are not over-used.

The Scholar, Pierre, enters and asks for something to eat. In a stroke of comic genius, as Father Philippe hides inside his gown and pulls out a devotional book pretending to study, Holst has his strings imitate plainchant in a modal style, sometimes in recognisable modes such as Mixolydian on C. Pierre is insulted by the priest and told to leave. The priest’s lines continue to be accompanied by this parody of plainchant. However, Alison likes the scholar and lets him stay and sing, to the great consternation of Father Philippe. The entire section again takes the form of a recitative and also makes use of more parlante singing giving the whole scene a sense of free flowing music not dominated by a time signature. Horns continue to punctuate the scene with their semitonal clashes; even though they are mere sound effects they remind the listener of the annoying situation on stage due to the horns’ role the first time that they were heard in this manner (refer back to 7.35).

Before Pierre starts to sing of his life as a wandering scholar the strings again prefigure his theme (7.36). He proceeds to sing of his life as a struggling, starving scholar who has had to sell all his books and possessions as the priest’s Latin oration interrupts at regular intervals. The Scholar begs Alison for some wine and a chunk of almond cake to appease his hunger. This appearance of the Scholar and the telling of his story form the central section of the work. Clifford Bax’s clever rhymes lend their comic sophistication to the proceedings:
And when the wind was cruel/Sold Seneca for fuel.
And next, as I grew thinner/Thank'd Ovid for my dinner;
But still the butcher, baker/And greedy candle-maker
Came to my garret and swore/That they would have no more
Till, with a grieving heart/I said: 'Then I must part
With mighty Homer's poem/To pay the debts I owe'em.'

He is violently dispatched by the priest despite his entreaties, and the ensemble is used in full force to express his anger. As soon as tempers calm the music does likewise.

More nonsense ensues as the two try to continue from the point at which they were interrupted. The role of the ensemble is less significant now: the recitative lyrics need to be clearly heard, but the turning point of the drama comes when Louis' theme is heard in the distance. He is returning home earlier than expected (7.37).

During the attempt to hide the priest, the opening music is heard, albeit beginning on a different pitch and with alterations in the rhythm. However, there is no mistake as to the source of the theme (7.38). In other words, the music is coming full circle as Louis returns home, this time with Pierre. The use of the perfect fourth pattern heard in the ensemble while the priest is hiding brings to mind an important motif that dominated *Egdon Heath* of 1927 (a work that could not be more unlike this one in mood), as well as the main theme of the Scherzo (7.39). More recitative follows as the circumstances surrounding their meeting is revealed. During the Scholar's story (a section using a new theme, as mentioned earlier: 7.40), as all of Alison's lies are revealed one by one, the ensemble once again uses the opera's opening declamation. The voices here make ample use of the perfect fourth interval, which is so prevalent in the introductory line (7.41).
After the priest is discovered (and the general pandemonium dies down when he runs out of the house with the help of a kick from Louis) the opening music, unifying the action as always, is heard once again in a completely different guise: a kind of quiet, but nervous tension (7.42).

Pierre is now able to sit at table and enjoy a meal. He quietly reiterates the music heard when the priest had been discovered and was being chased around the room and eventually thrown out. Very pleased with himself he begins to drink his wine, as the opening music quickly brings the story to an end as the curtain falls.

An overall look at Holst’s use of themes in *The Wandering Scholar* shows a similarity to that of *Sävitri*; however, in the case of the earlier work there are numerous themes of equal importance which represent characters or ideas, whereas the later opera is held together by relatively few themes. In *Sävitri* the numerous themes are constantly interconnecting to drive the drama forward with the exception of a few recitative passages which establish and debate philosophical points. In the case of *The Wandering Scholar* the smaller number of themes are used in specific places for specific purposes, and there develops a kind of hierarchy of importance among them.

This opera may be viewed on five different levels. The opening theme (7.27) is quite clearly of paramount importance, and its angular shape, the rests and the rising fourths all make it immediately recognisable (even in incomplete form) and provide the composer with smaller motifs and fragments for frequent use. With the exception of the singers’ presentation of it twice in the opening section (such as at 7.29) it remains
in the domain of the orchestra as a kind of support and commentary on the action. That, and the theme associated with Louis (7.28) clearly dominate the entire first section, which ends with Louis going off to town, leaving Alison alone. This opening theme comes back into use at a crucial point near the end in the final section, and the last gesture of the entire work is the same as the beginning, providing a "full circle" effect. Unlike the first theme of Savitri, that had an important symbolic role to play throughout, the opening gesture of Scholar disappears until rehearsal 38, having last been heard just before rehearsal 5. Similarly, Louis’s theme appears and disappears with him in the first section and is used only much later to signal his return in the final section. It is not to be found anywhere throughout the central portions. Even so, the use of these two themes is so pervasive and their effect is so strong when they do appear in the outer sections that they take on great importance, framing the work and becoming its primary thematic tier.

On a secondary level there are the themes—although clearly recognisable and used for specific dramatic purposes—that are relegated to particular portions of the opera. The mischievous themes 7.31 and 7.33 are peculiar to the next section; namely, the meeting of Alison and Father Philippe, and the priest’s call to her when he appears. This is the music that dominates the second section, and the entirely new material gives a strong sense of a new chapter of the story unfolding. During the third section, when the scholar has arrived looking for food and has been driven away, Alison and the priest are the only characters on stage once again and there are faint references to the thirds from 7.33, but no actual quotations from either of these themes. The final

[20] In other works, reference to Louis by other characters would have been accompanied in the ensemble by an allusion to his theme, but Holst deliberately avoids this.
theme that appears on this level is first heard when the Pierre is being driven from the house by the priest, who counts to ten, brandishing a cudgel. Its importance (albeit minor) is revealed only near the end in the final section when Louis does the same to the priest after the latter has been exposed, thanks to Pierre, and Holst uses the same music to represent the same dramatic situation. A final recurring theme appears in the last section as Pierre tells his fabricated story in order to expose the priest (7.40). He is interrupted after each “stanza” by Louis who is discovering one by one the lies of his wife. The curious theme characterised by augmented second intervals (7.40) is heard an adequate number of times to make it recognisable and to associate it with the telling of the story. But again, it has not been heard at any earlier point in the work—it is a purely final section phenomenon.

Even though these are the themes that are reused to give unity to the work, the primary level ones deal with drama and with structure, and the secondary ones mainly with drama. On a third level there are the recitative-like arias, which seems to be a contradiction in terms; however, Holst’s characters who wish to focus on specific feelings or incidents are given an almost free parlante rein such as Alison and her song of springtime (7.32) and Pierre recounting his life of study and poverty (7.36). These also occur once in the work; no motifs are used from them for constructing later portions, nor have they been born from earlier material. The songs on the “third level” are thoughtful in nature.

The true recitatives take their place on a fourth level—true, in that they fulfil the purpose of the recitative of pushing the drama forward, embellishing action on stage. The voices take precedence here, and the accompaniment is pared down, often to a
sustained pedal or a kind of rhythmic punctuation. After the more structured feel of the first section these recitatives tend to take their place mainly alongside the “level two” material.

A final level of minor importance are small portions whose function is hardly more than that of sound effects, namely the clashing semitones warning that danger is nigh (such as in 7.35), and the mock plainchant sung by the priest as he pretends to be studying his holy book as Pierre tells of his plight. Neither of these fits the definition of a theme or a recitative, etc but they do add humorous effect where they are used (again, at certain isolated spots within the same section of the work).

Recitative accounts for much if not most of the music. The text deals with storytelling on several levels and Holst wished to emphasise this by allowing the stories to flow with a freer musical background. The recurring themes are few—used just enough for their dramatic impact, particularly those two which were introduced at the beginning and reappear to close the work. The opera in its entirety depicted as four sections can be expressed as a diagram showing what sort of material is used where, and for what purpose (Figure 1).

General consensus among music writers seemed to be a kind of relief that Holst had a librettist to work with this time, rather than attempting another libretto on his own, a point of view that carries some merit. So far, in one case, his handling of a libretto was sadly lacking in sophistication (witness The Perfect Fool) and in another, the actual scenes were taken from a pre-existing source. Unfortunately, after The Wandering Scholar there would be no more opportunity to judge any possible further
comic libretti that he may have written. Even so, “Holst’s powers of characterization had improved in sharpness and in depth by the time he came to compose this one-act farce in 1929” (Howes, 1966, p 244). One can imagine that the quality of Clifford Bax’s libretto and Helen Waddell’s original story were great inspiration for Holst and that they had much to do with regard to his improved powers of characterisation.

In *The Wandering Scholar* Holst seems to adopt many successful elements of *Sāvitrī* and combine them with his more mature sense of dramatic humour. *The Perfect Fool* bordered on silliness, and *At the Boar’s Head*, although humorous, was the product of a specific challenge that Holst had set himself. With *The Wandering Scholar* Holst seemed to be back on familiar creative ground, doing for comic opera in 1930 what he had done for serious opera in 1909.

*The Wandering Scholar* has neither the looseness of *The Perfect Fool* nor the enforced tightness of *At the Boar’s Head*; it is easily the most stageworthy of the three. Holst had learnt much from his previous ventures, especially from his encounter with Shakespeare, and he was able to achieve the naturalness and fluency that had long defied him. The text and music are wedded indissolubly; there are many niceties of musical characterization, many touches that are rewarding, but nowhere is the passing moment permitted to upset the larger expression.

Ottaway, 1974, p 474

There is an ease in Holst’s manner, which is evident in this work. It is reminiscent of *Sāvitrī* in that

It is vivacious, pliable music, showing once more how Holst in his last works was freeing himself from mannerisms, and expressing himself in a language, the vocabulary of which had become instinctive and unlaboured.

Rubbra, 1947, p 44

---

21 Howes here referred to the year in which the work was begun, rather than the year in which it was completed.
Figure 1. The Wandering Scholar op 50
General Overview (including reappearance of themes)

Section One
opening themes.
- Louis
- Alison

Section Two
- aria I (Alison)
- meeting with Father Philippe
- recit style
  (no thematic material)

Section Three
Pierre appears (I)
- aria II
- he is driven away

Section Four
- opening themes
- Louis
- Pierre II
- aria (ballad) II
- confrontation

ending
using
opening music
It is evident that he had learned a great deal from his work with Shakespeare and the setting of the folk music; he had well and truly absorbed the idiom and was able to combine the lightness and lyricism of folk song with his own individual sound. An inherently folk song manner was appropriate for this story, considering its rustic setting, and Holst achieved the style successfully, even though it caused Ralph Vaughan Williams to worry in a letter of December, 1930, "do you think there's a little bit too much 6/8 in the opera?" (Vaughan Williams, U., and Holst, I., (eds.), 1959, p 75).

_The Wandering Scholar_ is probably the most successful of Holst's comic operas. The bawdy nature of the story could not be further removed from the dignified and philosophical _Sävürt_; it is almost hard to believe that they were the projects of same man. However, they share characteristics of technique that make them both very musically satisfying:

- an ensemble that is used rather sparingly which presents a sufficient number of memorable themes and motifs;
- themes (or parts thereof) which are reiterated at key points in the drama to underscore or foretell important moments;
- fragments of themes/motifs which are used as building blocks throughout to help to unify the sound;
- the use of pedals and of spoken dialogue or parlante singing that is not overdone;
- plot lines which move at an agreeable dramatic pace;
- the occasional use of five- and seven-beat time as well as changes of time signature in general that produce a flow of sound that moulds itself to the words, rather than forcing the text into metrical constraints.
With regard to the comic operas, then, Holst found himself in the situation wherein an early attempt proved unsuccessful; a second opera was hailed as a feat of cleverness (although many questioned its value as “real” opera); but finally came a highly laudable work representing the best of the composer in every sense: a recognisable Holstian manner, a minimum collection of thematic/motivic material that, with deft handling, capably blossoms into a complete and unified work, and a rather small ensemble\(^{22}\) in the hands of a true dramatist that produces maximum effect using these themes, as well as other appropriate touches of colour and subtle musical support.

Unlike \textit{Sāvitri}, the libretto of which was Holst’s own translation from the Sanskrit, he worked with Clifford Bax’s libretto on \textit{Scholar}, as we have seen. Whether or not Holst could have become a successful librettist for comic opera is a question that must remain unanswered since no more stage works were composed during the four remaining years of his life. However, it is highly likely that, given his powers for development as witnessed in other genres (as well as the masterpiece of \textit{Sāvitri}, the libretto of which was such a success), it is likely that he would have eventually become adept at comedy.

But comedy was not entirely in the forefront of Holst’s mind in 1930 and onward; in answer to a request from the organist of Gloucester Cathedral for a choral work with a concertante organ part he composed \textit{A Choral Fantasia} to words of Robert Bridges. Regardless of the fact that it was a commission, he found it amenable to his renewed sense of seriousness which was to display itself in quite a number of works. The \textit{Six}

\(^{22}\) The orchestral forces required are 1 piccolo, 1 flute, 1 oboe, 1 English horn, 2 clarinets in B flat, 2 bassoons, 2 horns in F, and strings (presumably, the arrangement as for a classical orchestra).
Choruses op 53 (1931), and the Eight Canons (1932) were all based on Helen Waddell’s solemn and sublime words from ‘Mediaeval Latin Lyrics’—the same writer, it will be recalled, who had provided Holst with the story for The Wandering Scholar. These are reminiscent of other choral works of the ‘thirties during which there was an upsurge of religious and quasi-religious compositions which rediscovered Latin text, putting them in “modern” context, such as Vaughan Williams’s Dona Nobis Pacem, Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms, Orff’s Carmina Burana, Howells’s Hymnus Paradisi and the Requiem. Some of Finzi’s work merits mention; although the texts were in English, the inspiration was the same, such as Dies Natalis (although this was composed closer to 1940). In the realm of instrumental music, Holst’s Lyric Movement, composed for Lionel Tertis in 1933, lives up to its title with its singing phrases and bittersweet mood. The majority of Holst’s output for the remainder of his life consisted of vocal music, particularly settings of poetry.

Nevertheless, sparks of humour still pervaded his repertoire: Hammersmith of 1930, Capriccio (1932) with their energetic and engaging central sections, and the Scherzo for orchestra, which displays such incredible vitality and good humour that it is difficult to imagine that it was composed by an ill, hospital-ridden man who died shortly after the score was finished.

Holst the opera composer in the early years of the century shares parallels with Holst the opera composer of his later period; early attempts served as training ground for the later works. Trial and error was very much the way forward, and it is fortunate that his character was such that he did not despair at “failure” or public indifference, even
disapproval. If that had not been the case, we may not have had the works that are now available for study (as well as, one hopes, for performance).

Holst was among the many artists of the late nineteenth century who could not help but feel the effect of Wagner; indeed, his student works—later rejected—were based on this model. In his youth the influence of Sullivan gave his music a certain lightness and melodic richness which pervaded the early stage works. Grieg and Mendelssohn, as well as Stravinsky to an extent, played their part in shaping Holst's preferences regarding form and harmony. But, as we have seen, the important period came with the struggle to free himself from influences outside his own imagination. His stylistic growth did not follow what may possibly be considered a typical route for an English composer of the time; although a great admirer of Elgar, Holst steered clear of the Teutonic legacy and turned toward the smaller forms which he preferred, such as those that celebrated English heritage.

The claim that Holst rejected Wagner is not quite accurate. He allowed Wagner to "lead him to fresh things", as he had put it to W.G. Whittaker, and admirably absorbed elements of the great master's approach to music drama (in particular, the use of the leitmotif) to create Sāvītri and later, The Wandering Scholar. The music of Holst cannot be placed comfortably within any particular school of composition. He was, for example, neither a symphonist nor a composer of concerti although he can surely be associated with what may be called 'the English school of choral music'. A glance at Imogen Holst's A Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music reveals that the greater number of his works are vocal—solo, choral, accompanied and unaccompanied—but this conveys only part of the picture. His breadth of musical
vision was nourished a wide spectrum of interests, and fascination with the world around him. Astrology, Sanskrit literature and philosophy, mysticism, literature and poetry, education, amateur performance, etc, all influenced and inspired his music. This prevents his being confined to any one category or placed within any one school.

At heart Holst was a dramatist, and an enterprising one, using what may have seemed somewhat unusual effects to express his text (one thinks of Tennyson’s The Splendour Falls with its use of an echo effect created by divided groups of singers in adjoining rooms separated by a closed door—shades of Neptune many years later). His basic instinct for drama in all the genres in which he composed naturally found its way into the operas, even though his early attempts were often clumsy, partly due to his lack of experience with the genre in a country which did not (does not?) see opera as an indigenous form of musical art, as it did the oratorio and other choral forms. Opera was always something imported from abroad.

His output of vocal music, particularly the numerous song settings composed throughout his career, makes the link between Sita and Sāvitrī more understandable. Holst needed a medium in which to work out his dissatisfaction with his three-act epic, and to discover what he really wanted as a composer of opera. He found his perfect medium in the Vedic Hymns song settings, which provided small forms for experimentation with minimal numbers of themes that expressed the texts, and how to maximise their dramatic effect. Without the Vedic Hymns, Sāvitrī would hardly have been possible. Even though the latter is his operatic masterpiece he was able to reach another triumph with his last opera, The Wandering Scholar, in 1930. Had the world
not lost him at such an early age, and had he turned his hand to opera once again, possibly even better was yet to come.
"And I wish myself the joy of your Fellowship at Whitsuntide 1935":

Epilogue

Holst’s wish for his own attendance at the 1935 Whitsuntide Festival, sent on a postcard with greetings to the Reverend George Street and all the participants, was not to be. The world was deprived of a great and innovative composer and teacher when Gustav Holst died after surgery for a duodenal ulcer at the tragically early age of fifty-nine in May, 1934. By the time of this correspondence in the month of his death, Holst had been in hospital for several weeks having decided to undergo a major operation rather than risk leading a restricted life. The important aspect, however, was the attitude of the composer to his confinement in hospital, how he passed the time, and his view of his own future.

Even though he chafed at being bed-ridden and having to face an operation, he did not lose his sense of humour, his enthusiasm for corresponding with friends, reading and, of course, composing. There are informative sketches dating from this time that show where Holst’s musical interests lay and what specific works were planned. Unlike some composers who have a premonition that their end is nigh and wish to commit to paper as much as possible, Holst was positive that he would survive this bothersome interlude and would be free to continue with his life’s work. Sadly, this was not the case, and it leaves us to speculate on what could have been if he had lived a longer life—in particular, whether the genre of opera would have continued to be an important part of his output. If so, would it have followed along the lines of The Wandering Scholar or would a new type of operatic language have inspired him?
Questions will have to be left unanswered, but we can gain some insight by looking at his output in and around 1933-34.

Considering the projects on which he was working at the time of his death and during the years just prior, it is evident that his interest in large-scale compositions was increasing. The master of single-movement works—the song, the part-song, the symphonic poem, chamber opera, etc—was turning his attention to multi-movement works such as a symphony and, by 1931, plans were already underway for a second choral symphony (which is why he had designated his op 41 ‘First Choral Symphony’, rather than just ‘Choral Symphony’).

The sketches for the Second Choral Symphony show Holst’s plan for the four movements; this time the poet of choice was George Meredith, and the scheme of poems was to be: first movement, “Hardy Weather” and “Tardy Spring”; the second, “Woodland Peace”; the third, “Spirit of Earth”. A bridge was meant to join the third movement to the fourth, which would be settings of “Dirge in Woods” and “Winter Heavens”. From among the several themes and attempted harmonisations are two that demonstrate his chordal, as opposed to contrapuntal, thinking (8.1, 8.2). His use of the pedal point is evident, as well as his esteem for successive parallel fourths.

This was the plan of Holst the setter of texts, but a relatively new genre he was seriously considering much closer to the time of his death was the multi-movement symphony, the layout of which would have been: I Allegro, II Adagio, III Scherzo. There is no indication anywhere in the sketchbooks of a fourth movement, therefore it is not known whether Holst planned to end his symphony (uncharacteristically) with
the Scherzo. Sketches for all three movements exist but only the Scherzo was completed while Holst was in hospital. The demonic energy of this work from beginning to end belies the fact that its composer, suffering from anaemia and a weak heart, created it while propped up on pillows in a hospital bed. It is a splendid work that is received well as a self-contained composition in its own right (8.3, 8.4, and 8.5). The (chosen) themes from the Allegro and the Adagio sketches both show that he was thinking in long lines, and was experimenting early on with harmony. The extract from the Scherzo is taken from the string introduction; it is followed by woodwinds climbing upward vigorously in connected links of melodic fourths. Holst may have been deteriorating physically, but his powers of concentration, mental energy and enthusiasm never waned.

By the time of Holst's death opera was not seen as the summit of musical art, with characters and plot lines that were larger than life. Composers of the 1920s and 1930s felt that opera should come down from its lofty heights and be able to express a more realistic world. Works of about this period tended to concern themselves with "low life" issues (Wozzeck) or popular contemporary idioms (e.g. Jonny spielt auf). The function of music was seen differently as well; Brecht's theory of "epic theatre" meant that the relationship between music and drama was deliberately ambiguous, thus freeing music from the obligation of having to support the meaning of the words.

It is doubtful whether Holst would have approved of Brecht's theory regarding the role that music plays in a dramatic/operatic setting, however, his latest choice of subject in Scholar did show a nod in the direction of his contemporaries. It is possibly not likely that mythological, spiritual or magical themes would grasp his imagination.
anymore, but a new opera may well have followed along the lines of *The Wandering Scholar* with its down-to-earth story line.

Considering the potential dimensions of the two unfinished compositions discussed above one could imagine Holst undertaking another operatic project; it is likely that he would try something on a larger scale now that he was a seasoned, experienced composer, and was also much more confident of his technique as a dramatist. *Sita* was long in the past and Holst would have been in no danger of repeating the style that had so repulsed him during a time when he was still struggling to find his voice. With a suitably inspiring subject or text it is possible that the world may yet have had more operas (even in three acts?) composed in the style that we now recognise as that of the mature Gustav Holst.
Bibliographical Sources


_____. A Lonely Figure in Music. *Radio Times*, 15 June, 1934, p 819.

Bonavia, F. At the Boar’s Head. *Music and Letters* 7, 1926, pp 269-75.


______, Notes for compact disc *This Have I Done For My True Love: Partsongs of Gustav Holst*, Hyperion CDA66705.


__________, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary*. London: Edward Arnold, 1914.

Tovey, D.F. The Perfect Fool; or, the Perfect Opera. *The Musical Times* 64, no. 965, July 1923, pp 464-65.


Voices

The horse-men and the foot men are pouring in from many a stately market-place from many a fruitful main.

Mystic Trumpeter op 18

Moderato
2.1 Allegro moderato  Indra (1903)
Invocation to the Dawn

Light hath come a-

midst all light the fair-est
Born is the bright-ness of the

Day
2.3a
Allegretto

The New Mown Hay

As I walked forth one summer's morn Hard by a river

side where yellow cowslips did adorn The blushing field with pride
Andante 2.3 b

Bedlam City

Down by the side of

Bedlam city Oh there I heard a maid complain, She was

making grievous lamentation I've lost my loved, my swain.
2.3c
Un poco vivace
The Scolding Wife

It's a Rosebud in June

It's a rosebud in June, and—violets in full bloom, and the small-birds

Singing love songs on each spray; we'll pipe and we'll sing. Love, we'll
dance in a ring—love; when each lad takes his lass all—on the green grass.
And it's all— to plough where the fat ox-en graze low; and the lads and the

lass-es to—sheep shearing go.
2.4b  Modest  A Somerset Rhapsody: bars 1-10  Um.

2.5a  High Germany

O Polly dear, Polly, the rout has now begun. And we must march away at the beating of a drum: Go dress yourself all-in your best and come along with me; I'll take you to the cruel wars in High Germany.
2.5b Moderato A Somerset Rhapsody: rehearsal 4

2.5c High Germany: alternate Version

A broad as I was walk-ing and a-walk-ing a-lone I

heard two lovers talk-ing and a-mak-ing their moan; Said the

older one to the fonder one "Bony lass I must a-way, For the King he has com-
manded us and his or-ders I must o-bey."

2.5d A Somerset Rhapsody: rehearsal 11
2.6a. The True Lover’s Farewell

Oh fare you well I must be gone and leave you for a while. But where ever I go, I will return, if I go ten thousand mile, my dear, if I go ten thousand mile.

2.6b. A Somerset Rhapsody: rehearsal 12

Poco Affretando
2.7a. Two Folksong Fragments I: "O! I Hae seen the Roses Blow" (theme)

2.7b. Two Folksong Fragments II: "The Shoemaker" (theme)
2.8 Vivace St. Paul's Suite: Jig (theme)

2.9 Vivace Two Pieces for Piano 2: Jig (theme)
2.10 'O Care thou wilt despatch me'  Weelkes

If music do not match thee, if music do not match

If music do not match thee, match thee. Fa
Nymphs begin to come in quickly, thick and three-fold; Now they dance,

now they prance, now they dance, now they prance, present there to be:
3.2 Lansdowne Castle (Act II, sc 5): treatment of magic themes  p. 29

Andante

(Hocus Pocus)  Half an ounce of Syrian figs, curl from ancient

pesante

maiden's wig Toe from living tiger torn Heel of boot a good deal worn

Head of Snake and tongue of frog slice of lemon used for grog
Button found upon the road
Then the leg of speckled toad
Here be charms to work a spell
Strong as woskey treacle
3.3 Lansdown Castle: Incantation

\[
\text{For the failing fire, Blow with sulphur breath}
\]

\[
\text{Plague and famine dire, Pestilence and Death}
\]

\[
\text{Draw the circle round, Skull and cross-bone blend}
\]

\[
\text{Night shrub and horehound, All to magic tend}
\]
3.4 The Revoke Op. 1: Interlude

(Vivace)

3.5 The Revoke Op. 1

(Richard) In bold language he forth with did re-gal, And
told me to go to the! (Orchestra "finishes" the sentence)
3.6 Allegro  Reprise: overture bb 30-37

3.7 For I last night at whist re-voiced!

Beau Brummel sings:

Accept his help without the slightest doubt for Brummel always knows what

he's a-bout

3.9 The Magic Mirror

Andante quasi Adagio
3.11  
*The Magic Mirror*

**Moderato ma agitato**

Curtain rises

3.12  
*The Magic Mirror: Cosmo sings*

Mine eyes are drawn again unto the mirror and spellbound

gaze upon its mystic surface
The Magic Mirror

3.13
Moderato. As the light in the mirror brightens to reveal the lady:

3.14 (Andante quasi Adagio)

3.15
leave the shrine when lies my soul entombed
3.16 The Idea: the Sentry's Song (Act I and end of Act II)

Our minister is very ill; he's really very, very ill. None worse in our dominion; but since I've thought the matter over I think he'll soon be well once more. Fa la la la la la la la la la! At least that's my opinion.

The Youth's Choice

3.17 Poco Animato  chromatic:

3.18 Andante quasi Adagio  The Youth's Choice (modal - Prelude)
3.19

The Magic Mirror

(orchestration unknown)

Youth's Choice

3 trb.
4.3 (Allegro)  Sita: Act I  chromaticism  p. 23

4.4  [Poco Adagio]  Sita: Act I  p. 44

Lakshman slowly raises himself.
4.7 Più Mosso

Sita: Act I

$p. 27$

Rama: Ha! Now within my

breast Hope burneth fiercely

$p. 40 a$

Sita: yea, thou art my hus — band! 'To be with thee in trust and love'
4.11 [Agitated]  
Sita: Act I

A dog! Then dost call me a dog! Beware!

Not a wise word I choose but a dog!

4.12 [Moderato]  
Sita: Act II

Ravanahail, Ravana dread One we thy Rakshas pay homage to thee

4.13 [Moderato]  
(Male Chorus) Sita: Act II

Ravanahail, Ravana Dread One!
4.14 Poco Animato  Sita: Act II

News of strife and warfare of insult and of vengeance. A man

has spurned my sister!

4.15 [Più mosso]  Sita: Act II

Sita: Thy bride? Base Raksha. The enemy's foe!
4.16  Sita: Act I - after Rama's prayer  p 29

Adagio (unseen chorus in distance  "Voices of the Earth")

Thou shalt be one — with me again. Farewell

(alternating 4/4 and 3/4)

4.17  Sita: Act III  p 114

Meno Adagio ("Voices of the Earth")

Sita my daughter  Don't forget me  I am she that never fail — eth.

No Tempo

4.18  Sita: Act II  pp 6-7

Moderato

Marithea:

Hear now a story of Ra-va-na;  A tale of Ravana's

might  Full of courage he arose one day  And called his herald to his side

4.19  Modal writing  Sita: Act III
4.20 Poco Adagio  
Sita: Act III  
p4

Rama: Across the silent mountains amidst the forest gloom never

firing I have followed Thine trodden path Thou shrowest me.

4.21 Andante maestoso (chorus: soprano only)  
Sita: Act II  
p14-7

Lanka's lord to Lanka's kingdom Home—ward rides with his

Bride.

4.22 Poco Adagio  
Sita: Act II  
p4
Allegro

Sita: Act II

4.23 (empty stage; faint glimmer of early dawn)

Ravana:
He sees a swan, a wondrous swan

with skin of gold shining brightly
4.25

Sita: Act II

Piano mosso

Suddenly I paused. I had reached the top. Below was a wall of

4.26

(quest veloce) — Sita: Act II

orch. (silent) In yonder hut Rama sleepeth with — Sita his bride Lakshman wondereth through the

4.27

Allegro (In the far distance) *Wooden hammers are to be used. Tempo never varies

Hammering:

Chorus (in the far distance) Work away comrades singing right joyously.
Sita: Act III

Allegro

[Music notation with annotations]

(Hammering)

On the mainland mortals singing

Echoing merrily
4.29 [Allegro]  

Sitā: Act III

& (Allegro)

Rama nearing our shore A bridge he deth build to bring him to thee.

Echoing merrily Work away comrades back to the hammering, over the water

Now will I show thee which is the mightier Rama the hus¬band or the

Echoing merrily Work away comrades Work a-way comrades
dread one of Lan-ka

Work away comrades singing right joyously.

4.30 [Largamente] Sitā: Act III

Hail the Sun's up-ris

Sing
4.31 Sita: Act III

Rama (un accomp.)

Peace thou fool! Wouldn't thou help me? Say - where is Sita? Where is my brother? Are they living or dead?

4.32
4.33  Sita Op 23: Catalogue of themes

Prologue to Act I

(from Act II: Sita threatens Ravana)

Earth (Act I, beginning)

Act I

opening of Act II
SITA: catalogue, continued.

Act III

beginning of Act II

Act II

Act II - war cry

frequently used rhythm

"We hearken O Dread One!"
SITA: catalogue, continued.

Act I: Surpanakha

Act II: Ravana

Sita "Behold the Sun's Uprising!"

(based on

Act II - Sita comes out of the forest (instrumental background)

solo violin (kento)
SITA: catalogue, continued

(fragment heard briefly)

"Help me Lakshman or I die." (A trick to lure Rama in hunting for a fawn)

(Lakshman's theme)

(Surpanakha tells Rama of Lakshman's fate)

Chorus of Rama's men are accompanied by
As the choro becomes louder and more insistent so does this little fragment

Act II

Act III
SITA: catalogue, continued

Act II - "Rama is my husband!" (used before) Str.

Tossed around between the various instruments. Surpanakha sings of
Lanka and Sita, who is now "queen."

-also in Act II: Heard as Ravana is sets
out to kidnap Sita.

Act III - Prologue => Rama's theme when curtain rises

(re-appears throughout Act III)

when Rama sings the theme is transposed

Surpanakha:

Sita the fair One, Sita the graceful One, Sita the lotus-eyed, Sita the
**SITA: catalogue, continued**

(cont'd)

raven-haired, A Queen is she now, Bride to the King of the Rakshas: Rava-ra

Dread One!

Also:

Surapanaka:

\[
\text{such as in Sāvitrī}
\]

-used in bridge-building scene, Act III (used earlier in description of Sīta)
SiTA: catalogue, continued.

Act III

beginning of Act II

Act II - war cry

frequently used rhythm

"We hearken 0 Dread One!"
SITA: catalogue, continued.

Act I. Surpanakha

Act II. Ravana

Sita. "Behold the Sun's Uprising!"

Act II. Sita comes out of the hut (instrumental background)

Solo violin (khele)
SITA: catalogue, continued

(fragment heard often)

"Help me Lakshman or I die." (A trick to lure Rama in hunting the fawn)

Helping Lakshman

Act II

Lakshman's theme

Act III

(Surpanakha tells Rama of Lakshman's fate)

Chorus of Rama's men are accompanied by

As the chorus becomes louder and more insistent so does this little fragment.
SITA: catalogue, continued

Act II - "Rama is my husband!" (used before) Str.

Tossed around between the other instruments. Surpanakha sings of Lanka and Sita who is now "queen".

- also in Act II: Heard as Ravana sets out to kidnap Sita.

Act III - Prologue ⇒ Rama’s theme when curtain rises

(when Rama sings the theme is transposed)

(re-appears throughout Act III)

Surpanakha:

Si ta the fair One, Sita the graceful One, Sita the lotus-eyed, Sita the —
SITA: catalogue, continued

(cont'd)

raven-haired, A Queen is she now, Bride to the King of the Rakshas, Ravana.

Dread One!

Also:

Surpanakha:

such as in Sūriti

-used in bridge-building scene, Act III (used earlier as description of Sita)
5.1 Ushas

5.2 (Adagio) Poco animato

5.3 Tempo I.

5.4 Lento Varuna
My cry is answered!

Might-y

War-riors, Children of Thunder,
5.6b
Un poco vivace
The Day of the Lord

The Day of the Lord is at hand at hand:

It's storms roll up the sky:

5.7 Andante con moto
Ratri (Night)
5.8 Indra

main theme

5.9 Adagio Varuna II (The Waters)

enharmonic

5.10 Piu mosso

bb17-18
5.11

5.12 Song of the Frogs

"Brothers rise and join the throng"

5.13 Moderato maestoso

Vac (Speech)

In the quest of all; First of those that mankind worship

5.14 Tempo I.

On the summit of the universe I bring forth the Further.
5.15

Hearken unto me. My word is true: Compassing the earth, I reach the Heav'n

5.16 Molto Adagio

Creation

Then Life was not! Non-life was not! No Vast expanse of air, Nor

Vaster realm of sky that lies beyond. Was water there, the deep abyss of ocean?

5.17 Opening theme: pitch collection
5.20 "Faith" layout

Bar 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

Verse:

Accomp.

Tonic chords
(any inversion)

5.21 Descent of scales (accompaniment)
6.1 Andante moderato

Death (unseen)

5.

9.

13.

17.

21.

--- reduction of Death's opening monologue ---

6.2

27-8.

Savelli:

20-1.

 Deaths:
6.7

6.8


"Sæ-vi-tri"

"Sat-ya-van"

"Ums. Z"

"Ums. Z"

"Ums. Z"

"Ums. Z"

6.8  Moderato

"He doth come."

"I see nought, What ails thee?"

"ppp legato"
I am with thee, my arms are round thee, Thy thought is mine, My spirit dwells with thee. When thou art weary I am watching, When thou sleepest I am waking, When in sorrow I am near making it a thing of joy beyond all other joys.
6.11
Motivic cell (Death)

284. Thy song, O Death is a murmur of rest.

6.13

6.14

6.15a
Thou art for the moment, portal soon passed.

6.15b
The fo-r... is to me a mirr...
6.16

Süv

But Life is eternal,

Vn I, II

6.17 Distant passage

mf

mf Str.

Full.
Thine the song, the path of flowers.

Death the just one, whose word ru-leth all, Grant me a boon, He
giveth me life.
6.21

So both he granted that—which alone fulfills his word.

6.22

"Māya"

122. These wondering 'twixt the world of Māya.

6.23 "Māya"
pen the gate to my path of flowers. The path of a woman's
Poco animato

Away, Death, back to thy kingdom. A.

(6.24)
(Death shrinks back)

Sâv. tone must thou travel true to thy word.
7.1a
The Sneeze Charm - Prelude (1918)

Poco vivace

7.1b

7.1c

7.1d

Tutti
7.2 Dance of Spirits of Earth

7.3 Dance of the Spirits of Fire

Dance of Spirits of Water
7.4
Wiz.
Andante

"She shall marry the man who does the deed no other can do."

Tri.

7.5
Wiz.
We will pretend you are the Princess. Smile gently, look gracious-

Wm. Str.

7.6
Round: Three Girls at the Wall (repeated as often as necessary)

1
Water clear, water pure, Never failing friend art thou.

2
Why do the pa-gets never sing of thee, Water pure water dear?

3
As each day down we bring our pitchers Greeting thee and sing- ing thy praise.
7.7
Fl.

7.8

7.9

Princess: "I must marry the man who does The deed no other can do."

7.10
Wizard: He knows the secret wisdom and lore; his powers extend throughout the world and reaches to that unseen world.

7.11a

Troubadour: From far-off land I come,—A land of vine and olive tree: A land where men are singing Songs of love all day.
7.11b
To claim thee as my bride.

7.12
Traveller: Hail thee, High-Born! Holy happiness,

Whole soonest health Dwell with thee Dairly!

7.13
Princess: But, Sir, I think we have heard this before.
Now the

"Water" theme

Door is o-p ened. Now my life begins, Now the earth is lost to me,

Now love comes to birth.

7.15 Andante

(As the Foul Yawns)

7.16 Allegretto
dolce

Princess: Say a word, no more will I weary you, tell me that you love _ me.
Falstaff

Prince: O vil lain--thy lips are scarce wiped since thou drunk'est last

Tutti (Theme)
all the birds that ever I see The owl is fair-est in her de-gree, For
all the day long she sits on a tree, And when the night comes a-way flies she.

FALSTAFF (outside)

Give me a cup of sack, boy.

whit-te whoo, Sir Knave, to you. This song is well sung, I
whit-te whoo, Sir Knave, to you. This song is well sung, I

To whom drinkst thou? This song is well sung, I

(FALSTAFF enters and comes forward angrily)

make you a vow, And he is a-
make you a vow, And he-
make you a-

plague of all cow-ards, I say, and a ven-geance too! mar-ry, and a-
all the birds that ever I see

The owl is fairest in her degree, For

all the day long she sits on a tree, And when the night comes away flies she.

FALSTAFF (outside)

Give me a cup of sack, boy.

(A Drinker with cups enters and waits behind until called. Peter, Godolphin and Sir John step one by one on seeing Falstaff)

whit ' te whoo,
Sir Knave, to you. This song is well sung, I

whit te whooo,
Sir Knave, to you. This song is well sung, I

To whom drinkst thou? This song is well sung, I

(FALSTAFF enters and comes forward angrily)

plague of all cowards, I say, and a vengeance too! mar-ry, and a-
weaver; I could sing psalms or anything.

A plague of all cowards I say.

How now, wool-sack!

A king's son!

If I do not beat thee out of thy kingdom

with a dagger of lath, and drive all thy subjects afore thee like a flock of
(From now onwards when anyone calls for sack someone else pours it out for him.)

PRINCE

O villain thy lips are scarce wiped since thou drunkest last.

FALSTAFF

—day. (b) All's—

(drinks)

one for that.

A plague of all

What's the matter?

cowards, still say I. What's the matter! there be four of us here have

Where is it, Jack? where is it?

taken a thousand pound this day morning.
7. 18 d

Villanous news abroad: Here was Sir John Bracy from your father: You must to the court in the morning. That same mad fellow of the North, Percy, and he of Wales, that gave Amamon the bastinado, and made Lucifer cuckold, and swore the
devil his true liegeman upon the cross of a Welsh hook—what a plague call you him?

POINS

O, Glendower.

FALSTAFF

"Night Piece"

Owen, Owen, the same; and his son-in-law Mortimer, and old Northumberland, and

that sprightly Scot of Scots, Douglas, that runs o'horse back up a hill perpendicular.

Well, he is there too, and one Mor-dake, and a thousand bluecaps more: Worcester

is stolen away to-night; thy father's beard is turned white with the news: you may buy land now as cheap
Why then, it is like, if there come a hot June—and this
civil as stinking mackerel.

buf-fet-ing hold, we shall buy maid- en-heads as they buy hob- nails, by the hun- dreds.

By the mass, lad, thou say-est true; it is like we shall have good

trading that way. But tell me, Hal, art not thou horrible a-feard? thou being heir- apparent,
(Enter PRINCE HAL and POINS)

PRINCE (Prince and Pains come forward) mf 6

How now, wool-sack!

Poco Allegro

PRINCE (Prince and Pains come forward) J = 112

A king's son!

If I do not beat thee out of thy kingdom

Poco Allegro j = 112

staccato

What mutter you?

(goes towards him)

A king's son!

If I do not beat thee out of thy kingdom

sempre staccato

with a dagger of lath, and drive all thy subjects a-fore thee—like a flock of
breathe a while, and then to it again: and when thou hast tired thyself in base comparisons, hear me speak but this.

PRINCE

POINS

We two saw you four set on four and

Mark, Jack.

bound them, and were masters of their wealth. Mark now, how a

plain tale shall put you down. Then did we two set on you four; and, with a
For God's sake, lords, convey my tristful queen; For tears do stop the flood-gates of her eyes.

O Jesu! He doth it as like one of these harlotry players as ever I see!

Peace, good pint-pot; peace, good tickle-brain. Harry, Harry.
I do not only marvel where thou spend'st thy time,

but also how thou art accompanied: for though the camomile,

the more it is trodden on the faster it grows, yet youth, the more it is

wasted the sooner it wears. That thou art my son, I have partly thy

mother's word, partly my own opinion, but chiefly a
What, a hundred upon poor four of us. What, a hundred upon poor four of us.

I am a rogue, if I were not at half-sword with a dozen of them two hours together. I have escaped by miracle.

I am eight times thrust through the doublet, four through the hose; my buckler...
cut through and through; my sword hacked like a hand-saw.

I never dealt better since I was a man: all would not do. A plague of all cowards!

PRINCE: a tempo

Speak, sirs; how was it?

GADSHILL: a tempo

We villains and the sons of darkness.

(7.18 h)
Why, gross as a mountain, open, palpable. Why, thou clay-brained guts, thou

knotty-pated fool, thou whorson, obscene, greasy tallow-catch.

What, art thou staccato

Why, how couldst thou know these mad? art thou mad? is not the truth the truth?

men in Kendal green, when it was so dark thou couldst not see thy hand? come, tell us your reason:
Come, I'll be friends with thee, Jack:

you art going to the rail.

There is nobody cares.

This Doll Tear-sheet should be some road.

I warrant you, as common as the way between Saint Albans and London.
How might we see Falstaff bestow himself to-night in his
true colours, and not ourselves be seen?
Put on two leathern jerkins and aprons, and

From a god to a bull? a heavy des-
-cen-sion! it was Jove's case. From a prince to a prentice? a low
transformation! that shall be mine; for in ev'ry-thing the purpose must weigh with the

(The Prince and Poins go to the back and put on jerkins and aprons)
Poco Lento

fol-ly. Follow me, Ned.

Thou dost give me flatter-ing buses.

By my troth, I kiss thee with a most con-stant heart.

I am old,

I love thee bet-ter than I love e'er a scur-ry young

I am old.
HOSTESS

Are you not hurt i' the groin? me-thought 'a made a shrewd thrust at your belly.

Ah, you whorse-son litt-le val-i-ant rogue! i' faith, I love thee;

Ah, sweet litt-le rogue, you!

A-las, poor ape—how thou swearest! come, let me wipe thy face; come on,

you whorse-son chops: ah, rogue! i' faith, I love thee:
lait
erffollo'voed hy the drawer, arrang' e lig h ts in the room.)

PRINCE —

How now! __

BARDOLPH

what news?

The king your fa-ther is at Westminster;

By heaven, Poins, I

you must a-way to court, sir, present-ly.

("Jenny-come-tie"

feel me much to blame, So id-ly to pro-fane the pre-cious time;

temp-east of com-mo- tion, like the south Borne with black va-pour,
and I come to draw you out by the ears.

SOLDIERS (in the distance, unseen.)

Stand to it, noble
Poco Allegro = 116

Lord Willoughby

pike-men, and look you well about: And shoot you right, you bow-men, And

we will keep them out: You musquet and caliver men, Do you prove true to

me, I'll be the fore-most man in fight, Says brave Lord
Humour of your idleness: Yet here-in will I imitate the sun, who
doth permit the base contagious clouds To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself, Being wanted, he may be more
wonder'd at, By breaking through the foul and ugly mists Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
If all the year were playing holidays, To sport would be as tedious as to work; But when they
Wolvf Muiy

7.19
first tune

hoist

sel-dom come, they wish'd for come, and nothing pleas-eth but rare ac-ci-dents.

So when this loose be-ha-viour I throw off And pay the debt I ne-ver prom-ised, By

how-much bet-ter than my word I am, By so much shall I fals-i-fy men's

hopes; And like bright me-tal on a sul-len ground, My re-form-a-tion,

glit-ter-ing o'er my fault, Shall show more good-ly and at-tract more eyes Than
(7.19 Holst first tune)

Andante $J = 88$

that which hath no foil to set it off. I'll so offend, to make offence a skill;

(Enter, Falstaff, Poins and Hostess)

Re-deeming time when men think least I will.

28 Allegretto $J = 108$

Here comes lean Jack, here comes bare-bone. How now, my sweet creature of

bombast! How long is't ago, Jack, since thou sawest thine own knee?

Falstaff

My own knee! when I was about thy years, Hal, I was not an eagle's
ev-er I dress my-self hand-some till thy re-turn: well, heark-en at the end.

(Poins comes forward disguised as a Drawer)

Allegro

Let them be-gin. Sit on my

The mu-sic is come, sir.

knee, Doll.

Sing, sir.

De-vour-ing Time, blunt thou the li-on's

paws, And make the earth de-vour her own sweet brood; Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce ti-
- ger's jaws, And burn the long-lived phoe- nix in her blood; Make glad and

sorry sea- sons as thou fleets, And do what-e'er thou wilt, swift-foot-ed Time, To the wide

world and all her fad- ing sweets; But I for- bid thee one most hein- ous crime:

Oh carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow, Now draw no lines there with thine ant- ique

pen; Him in thy course un- taint-ed do al- low For beau- ty's
pat-tern to suc-ced-ing men—Yet, do thy worst, old Time: de-spite thy

wrong, My love shall in my verse ev-er live—young.

(Falstaff has been disapproving of the
words of the song. He suddenly interrupts)

When Ar-thur first in court began And

was ap-prov-ed king, By force of arms great vic-tor-les won And con-quest home did bring. Then

in-to Eng-land straight he came With fifty good and a-ble Knights, that re-sort-ed—

(As the Prince begins again, Doll puts her hand over Falstaff's mouth)

count the clock that tells the

(He continues softly) sempre

And ma-ny jousts and tourn-a-ments Where-
7.21 – Holst original tume: third

Allegretto

sack. Si fort-une me tor-men-te, spe-ra-to me con-ten-to. Fear we

1st COMPANION

Allegretto \( J = 100 \)

broad-sides? no, let the fiend give fire: Give me some sack; and,

for- t-u-ne me tor-men-te, spe-ra-to me con-

(laying down his sword)

sweet-heart, lie thou there.

Come we to full points

ten-to. Fear we broad-sides? no, let the fiend give fire:

2nd COMPANION

Si fort-u-ne me tor-men-te, spe-
(7.21 - second Holst tune combined with "Sir Lancelot du Lake")

brave day sunk in hideous night; When I beheld the violet past prime, and sable curls, all silver'd

DOLL

But one Sir Lancelot du Lake who was approved well, He made surmount the rest.

o'er with white; When lofty trees I see barren of for his deeds and feats of arms All others did excel.

He
7.22

Falstaff:

"Men!"

Ere I lead this life long, I'll see no more stocks.

7.23a

ff posato. Tutti

7.23b

7.24

Fugue to be sung in villanous manner.

7.25

7.26

4/16th
7.27 Allegro Moderato

(Theme spanning three columns)

7.28

When boughs are green in April I ask no more of life Than beef and ale, an old dog And a fair and las-ty wife.

7.29

Alison: Louis, be off! Let go my arm! There's plenty of work for you on the farm.

7.30 String accompaniments using fourths
7.31

Indication of theme

Theme in full

7.32

Andante

Alison: When rainbows follow flying showers, The almond tree puts forth new flowers,

And no-one counts it strange at all if presently the blossoms fall.

7.33

Animato

Father Philippe: Piggy, piggy, piggy, Piggy piggy! Is my little pig at home?

7.34

Animato

Ph.: The time has well chosen. And we can make good cheer. I see that you have excellent red wine,
7.35

Alison: Someone is coming!

(Theme interrupted)

7.36

Pierres: Before that I was twenty I left my father's plenty As a high met - it'd hand will slip the collar;

7.37: Louis' theme (Fl.) — see 8.25
7.38 Allegro

7.39 "Schahed" Vn I

Egdon Heath

7.40 'Story' theme

As I was walking here to-day I left the road and took my way through
stream trickling flow-er-y wood
8.1  from sketches for Second Choral Symphony

8.2  Thousand eyeballs under hoods Have you by the hair

8.3  Symphony fragments (Allegro)
8.4
Symphony fragments (Adagio)

8.5
Symphony "fragments" (Scherzo)
Str. ff pesante

C. I, Bon
# APPENDIX I

**GUSTAV HOLST—The Operas (1892-1930)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Librettist</th>
<th>Instrumentation</th>
<th>First Performance</th>
<th>MS Autograph</th>
<th>Publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lansdown Castle, or the Sorcerer of Tewkesbury Comic operetta in two acts</td>
<td>original</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>A.C. Cunningham Country Dance (Act II): orch</td>
<td>piano;orch</td>
<td>7 February 1893</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 47805</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ia the Romantic operetta for children</td>
<td>based on idea by Anna Newman</td>
<td>c. 1894</td>
<td>Fritz B. Hart</td>
<td>piano Ländler &amp; Storm Dance: orch</td>
<td>probably 1895</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Revoke, op 1 opera in one act</td>
<td>based on <em>Beau Brummel</em></td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Fritz B. Hart</td>
<td>2 fl, 2 ob, 2 cl 2 bn, 2 hn, tpt timp, str</td>
<td>never performed</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 47806</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Magic Mirror Sketches for first scene of opera</td>
<td><em>Phantastes</em> by George Macdonald (extract)</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Fritz B. Hart</td>
<td>strings</td>
<td>never performed</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 47807</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Idea Operetta for children in two acts</td>
<td>based on idea by Anna Newman</td>
<td>c. 1896</td>
<td>Fritz B. Hart</td>
<td>fl, ob, cl, hn, str</td>
<td>probably 1896</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 57869</td>
<td>Novello, 1903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Librettist</td>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>First Performance</td>
<td>MS Autograph</td>
<td>Publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Pantomime of Cinderella</td>
<td>fairy-tale of Cinderella</td>
<td>c. 1901-2</td>
<td>Gustav Holst</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>14 &amp; 15 April 1902</td>
<td>does not survive</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Youth's Choice op 11</td>
<td>original</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Gustav Holst</td>
<td>3 fl/picc, 2 ob, c.a., 2 cl, 2 bsn, 4 hn, 2 tpt, 3 trb, tuba, timp, perc, hp, str</td>
<td>never performed</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 47815 vocal score: Britten-Pears Library</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sita, op 23</td>
<td>The Ramayana</td>
<td>1899-1906</td>
<td>Gustav Holst</td>
<td>3 fl, pic, 2 ob, c.a., 2 cl, b. cl, 2 bsn, d bsn, 4 hn, 2 tpt, 2 cornets, 3 trb, b. trb, timp, perc, hp, str</td>
<td>never performed</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 47821-47823</td>
<td>unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savitri, op 25</td>
<td>The Mahābhārata</td>
<td>1908-09</td>
<td>Gustav Holst</td>
<td>2 fl, c.a., 2 str quartets, d.b., chorus s s a a</td>
<td>5 December 1916</td>
<td>Bodleian MS Don.c.3</td>
<td>Goodwin, 1923 Curwen 1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera as She is Wrote</td>
<td>parody on English, German, French and Italian opera</td>
<td>1917-18</td>
<td>Morley College students</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 March 1918 (Britten-Pears Lib.)</td>
<td>fragmentary parts only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Librettist</td>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>First Performance</td>
<td>MS Autograph</td>
<td>Publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Perfect Fool, op 39, opera in one act</td>
<td>original</td>
<td>1918-22</td>
<td>Gustav Holst</td>
<td>picc, 2 fl, 2 ob, c.a., 2 cl, b. cl, 2 bsn, d. bsn, 4 hn, 4 tpt, 3 trb, tuba, timp, b. dr, tamb, jingles, gong, xyl, cel, hp, str</td>
<td>14 May 1923</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 57891 (partly autograph)</td>
<td>Novello 1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the Boar's Head, op 42, interlude in one act</td>
<td>Henry IV</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Wm. Shakespeare</td>
<td>picc, fl, ob, c.a., 2 cl, 2 bsn, 2 hn, 2 tpt, tuba timp, str</td>
<td>3 April 1925</td>
<td>Brit. Lib. MS 57894 (partly autograph)</td>
<td>Novello 1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wandering Scholar, op 50, opera da camera in one act</td>
<td>The Wandering Scholars</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Clifford Bax</td>
<td>picc, fl, ob, c.a., 2 cl, 2 bsn, 2 hn, str</td>
<td>31 January 1934</td>
<td>Britten-Pears Library</td>
<td>Faber 1971</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Appendix II: Sanskrit Sources

The following is a selective bibliography for further study into Hindu philosophy and epic poetry, which had profoundly influenced Holst as a young man, and had inspired two of the operas as well as the songs discussed in this dissertation.

*Bhagavad Gītā*


*Mahābhārata*


(This is a shortened modern prose version.)


*The Ramayana*


*Rig Veda Sanhita*


Appendix III: Synopses of the Operas of Gustav Holst

Synopsis 1. *Lansdown Castle, or the Sorcerer of Tewkesbury* (1892)

Operetta in two acts (vocal score: possibly no full score)
Characters: Lady Isabel, Lady Rigmaree, Lord Raymond, 
Sir Rigmarole, Sir Rigmaree, Baron Proser, 
the Sorcerer Hocus Pocus
Libretto A.C. Cunningham
Source: original story by A.C. Cunningham

Act I

1. Song. Lady Isabel is singing of the secrets of happiness in married life: 
common interests, civil language, and remember that the wife is always 
right in every quarrel.

2. Duet. She is joined by Lady Rigmaree as they continue on this topic.

3. Trio. The above joined by Lord Raymond. Continues along the same 
lines regarding behaviour between the sexes. Raymond adds that a third 
party must be wary of taking sides during a domestic dispute. Raymond 
admits that Isabel (?) frequently drives him to despair with her temper, 
while the ladies compare wedlock to being caged like a canary.

4. “Nagging Trio”. The quarrel intensifies during the trio as both genders 
are accused of causing the most discontent.

5. Song. Raymond gives his final opinion when he sings “When a man 
moves a woman he carries a cross that will crush him and lay him down 
low...misery woe”.

6. Quartet. The male characters sing of their boredom due to the fact that 
they have nothing to do, and what will become of them? Raymond 
considers having tea with his wife as entertainment. He asks that 
Rigmaree help him—put his conjuring cap on and think of a solution. 
Recitative. Rigmaree remembers hearing that morning of a sorcerer in 
Tewkesbury who may be able to cure Raymond of the blues. (“In 
Tewkesbury town is a man of renown/A sorcerer fertile and famous”) He 
is called Hocus Pocus. Rigmaree and Proser sing of the sorcerer and plan 
a game of disguising themselves and going to visit him. This section is 
followed by a dance.

7. Song. Lady Isabel and Lady Rigmaree. They sing of their happy times 
when they were young and unmarried. Promises of happiness were made 
to them, but married life has proved a disappointment.
Act II

8. Song. This is actually a quartet of Isabel, Lady Rigmaree, Rigmarole and Proser on her unhappiness in married life ("Of Beef and Beer")

9. Finale of Act I. Same quartet. They all decide to leave the castle and Raymond that very day and go to Tewkesbury. Their plan is to see Hocus Pocus first before Raymond and Rigmaree do as revenge. [The purpose of the visit and of the revenge are not made clear!]

Act II

1. Song. Hocus Pocus. Introduces and describes himself; he then begins to boast of his great powers.

2. Quintette. Isabel, Lady Rigmaree, Rigmarole, Proser and the Wizard. They explain to the Sorcerer that the other two are coming to see him as well. Hocus Pocus bemoans the fact that he must deal with two wives crossing "on a sea of vengeance tossing".

3. The wizard's opinion seems to be that for errant husbands the thing to do is for them to stay at home with their wives and play cribbage in the parlour. And women do not appreciate it when they have caught themselves a prize. They all wonder about the prospect of the unhappiness of going through life alone—"what sorrow awaits the man who has no married home".

4. Concerted Piece. Raymond, Rigmaree and Hocus Pocus. The two come disguised, pretending to be sailors soon off on a journey and wish to see some performance of magical art. The Sorcerer tells them that he is not fooled by their ruse and calls them by name. They think him a marvellous and frightening wizard—he knew their true identities.

5. Incantation 1. (Notes in pencil in GH's hand regarding Lucifer and crucible smoke.) Hocus Pocus concocts a potion.

6. Trio. Raymond, Rigmaree and Hocus (with hidden quartet [?]). The wizard offers to conjure up demons and all sorts of unpleasant beings; Rigmaree is afraid but Raymond claims not to be.


N.B. The quartet consists of the other four characters. (Are they in hiding from the other two characters now with the wizard?)

---

1 It is often unclear in the ensemble numbers who exactly is singing; names are not always written in and reference has to be made back a page or pages in order to clarify.

2 There are no stage directions, and characters constantly appear and disappear suddenly, making the staging unclear and the action difficult to picture.
8. Incantation 3. Hocus Pocus threatens to cast a spell that will bring up married ladies. The two men refuse and threaten to leave without paying the wizard's fee.

9. Finale of Act II. The sorcerer curses the cheating nobles, wishing on them doubling of domestic squabbles, and endless problems with their steeds, etc. The men leave. The ladies reappear and in panic ask why the Sorcerer is so angry. He tells them that they ignobly left without paying his fee. Now the women are defending their husbands, and Isabel offers to pay the fee. She suddenly realises that she has forgotten her purse and asks Lady Rigmaroe to lend her the money. She does not have any money either, and neither do either of the men with them, since Lord Raymond who employs them has not paid them their quarter's salary. So there is not a penny among the four of them.

The Sorcerer is being cheated again (so he says) and threatens to work a spell that will cause broken bones and bruises. The ladies weep and implore him not to do this. He refuses, and the two men enter complaining of injuries they have just received from falling from their horses. Hocus Pocus wonders sarcastically how this could have happened. They had barely managed to escape having their necks broken; the wizard claims that it would surely have happened had their wives not begun to plead on their behalf, causing the wizard to be unable to finish his spell. The men owe their lives to their wives.

Strife breaks out between the couples as both husbands accuse their wives of stealing a kiss from Baron Proser. Threats of death are exchanged until the sorcerer steps in. He insists it is all a misunderstanding. What a great blunder it would be to go through life quarrelling; "why squander the happy chance to lead a happy life".

The couples sing of returning to their home in peace, their squabbles at an end. The Sorcerer claims that all the jealousy and doubt has been extinguished and that his fee should be sent to the hospital. The whole thing has just been a lark anyway!

Synopsis 2.  

Operetta in one act
Characters: Beau Brummel, Sir Henry Playfair, Lady Playfair, Emily, Richard Carlton
Libretto: Fritz Hart
Source: based on Beau Brummel

Emily is torn by her feelings; her father, Sir Henry Playfair, has not given his consent to Richard Carlton's plea for her hand. Lady Playfair comforts her—if theirs is true love then it will withstand all trials. Beau Brummel enters; he has left Sir Henry over his wine and left Richard with him, to ask once again for his consent. Lady Playfair fears that he
will say “no” again. Brummel advises not to give way to gloomy thoughts. He’ll do what he can to bring about the young couple’s union.

He tells Emily to listen to him: he is, without doubt, one of Great Britain’s most celebrated men. He is consulted in all matters of good taste, and people heed his word, even about the latest fashion in neckties. He is so reliable in everything and he suggests they “accept his help without the slightest doubt/For Brummel always knows what he’s about”. His sensitivity is astonishing. An example: years ago he eloped with a sweet young girl, the daughter of an Earl. But before they reached the corner of the street they had to part for he found that she did eat cabbage!! His name could never be joined to one who ate cabbage, no matter how sweet she was.

Richard enters and says that Sir Henry has again refused his consent. With beating heart he had asked him once again. Angrily he was told he would never wed her, as Richard could not be a gentleman for last night he revoked at whist. Sir Henry told him to go to the devil. What a terrible blow! Could anything worse happen to a special love like theirs? Brummel says this situation calls for everyone’s wit to resolve it. He has a plan, but does not know if it will succeed...

Sir Henry will insist upon his game of whist as soon as he returns and Brummel plans to prove that it is foolish to come between Dick and Emily. He instructs Lady Playfair that, while they are playing, she should with all deception trump her partner’s trick. Sir Henry will quake and then Brummel will revoke. Sir Henry will choke with rage. But then he’ll see that everyone makes mistakes, and will then give in. Everyone agrees that it is a clever idea, and a likely way out of their problems. Henry will be so angry with Brummel that he’ll forget Richard’s revoking; he’ll relent and give his consent.

Sir Henry is heard outside; Brummel and Lady Playfair push Emily and Richard into the conservatory. Sir Henry demands to know where Emily has gone—there are but three of us “found it all at dummy”. Brummel says that he should be pleased: it’s fortune’s kindest stroke, “for dummy cannot well revoke”. Lady Playfair produces the cards and invites them all to begin the game. Emily comes forward with Richard to watch from behind the shrubs. She sings of how true love stands strong for eternity against the wrong.

Sir Henry sees Richard and is angry that he has not yet left their home. He accuses both him and Emily of deception, and insists that Emily join them at their game. Emily, Lady Playfair and Brummel whisper among themselves.

Sir Henry tells Emily to play together with Brummel. As they play Brummel starts to gossip with Lady Playfair, trying to disrupt the concentration. Henry interrupts and demands that they play. They
continue to play. It goes according to their plan as Sir Henry becomes increasingly annoyed. He demands again that they all stop talking (for the gossiping had resumed). The game continues.

The cards are shuffled again for a new game. During the game Richard makes comments to Emily about her always leading with a heart, and that he will always follow. His double meaning is clear to all. As they play he professes his love by referring to hearts and the Queen of Hearts ("you are the queen of hearts my dear, and I'll be the king of the queen").

Another collection of cards; shuffling; dealing. Lady Playfair drops her fan; Brummel rises to pick it up and gives her the signal that sets their plan in motion. Sir Henry is angry with Lady Playfair's play. She pretends to become enraged, telling him that she'll never play with him again; she leaves the table. Sir Henry turns to challenge Brummel to take her place.

There are anxious looks all around as the two begin to play. Brummel revokes, pretending to be angry. Sir Henry warns him about his "behaviour". He tries to comfort him for having to revoke, and suddenly realises that he has been caught out. All around him laugh. Brummel points out that he must admit he had been angry with Dick for the revoke, but for the same mistake from Brummel he was quick with excuses. Lady Playfair tells her husband that it will look ludicrous if he continues to refuse Richard. The only way out is to bless the union and all strife will be over. Sir Henry gives his blessing. Brummel has the last word for Sir Henry: don't be too hard on a chance mistake, for if Brummel can make this mistake then surely anyone can! Gaiety all around, as everyone praises Brummel's wisdom.

Synopsis 3. The Magic Mirror [1896; unfinished]

Characters: Cosmo and the Lady of the Mirror
Libretto: Fritz Hart (incomplete)
Source: Phantastes by George MacDonald (extract)

Cosmo is discovered reading "in the red glow of sunset which gradually deepens". Now and then he looks up from his book to the mirror on the wall. Spellbound he gazes on its mystic surface. Something in his soul compels him to search the mirror. The day is ending and he says "twilight's hour will bring thee here again". He ponders on his fate that he should be burdened with such a strange and wondrous destiny. He awaits the Lady of the Mirror and complains, "Love comes to me with all its bitterness/But ne'er the sweetness of its mystery".

The red glow has disappeared; now there is deep gloom. A faint white light appears in the mirror which gradually increases. Cosmo notices and
stares at the mirror with suppressed excitement, knowing that she is about to appear.

The outline of the figure and face of a woman appears in the mirror, at first dimly. The white light continues to brighten. Cosmo feels the Lady’s presence just “as the night doth feel th’approach of day”. The white light is now dazzling and bright as the Lady is clearly seen in the mirror. He confesses that his love has grown to such excess that he will die unless she appears before him in reality. Suddenly he feels a power growing within him and he knows that he can compel her presence to him; he summons her by all “the pent-up longings of my soul which now do burst their flood-gates”.

He shouts, commanding for her to appear. The Lady enters the room, pale and dazed. She asks Cosmo why he has summoned her here through all the crowded streets. He tells her his love for her gave him the strength to do so. She is amazed at his words and asks him who he is.

Cosmo tells her his name and that he is a poor student. He sought her image at times within that mystic mirror, and he did learn to love her. She tells him that as long as the mirror exists she is the slave of a magician’s will. Cosmo declares that now that he has called her here by the power of his love she will be free. She cries out that “beneath the mirror’s baneful spell I pine and droop ‘till Death shall bring release”.

[The work ends at this point.]

---

3Note: In the sketches the name Oswald is written on the top corner of one sheet. Could this have been another character? There is also new text material: the Lady exhorts Cosmo to take his sword and with a blow shatter the mirror. Only then the dawn of hope and the sunlight of existence will smile upon her life. Cosmo asks if, when she is free from the unholy spell, she could learn to love him. She answers “No Cosmo, I could never be thy love” [cuts off]

In a second set of sketches after the line “‘till Death shall bring release” Cosmo asks if there is nothing that can break the cursed spell [cuts off]

Third set of sketches: the Lady tells him that relentless fate has willed it so: with the mirror broken they must part and like divided rivers start upon different ways until they come to the vast dark sea of Death’s immensity. Cosmo insists that their paths are the same if he does not break the spell. She then pleads with him to break the mirror and set her free from the unblessed fate. [cuts off]

Humorous operetta for children in two acts.

Characters: Prime Minister, King, Queen, Max (a Sentry), Caroline (the Prime Minister’s wife), Mona (the knitting woman), chorus.

Libretto: Fritz Hart.

Source: based on an idea of Anna Newman

Act I: In front of the Prime Minister’s house.

The Prime Minister has come up with a marvellous Idea with which he hopes to bring great happiness to the people. King, Queen and all the people are extremely surprised that he could manage an Idea, but they wish to know what it is. He presents his Idea to the King: “There is a great deal of trouble in this world. What is the world made up of? Men and women. Who rules the world? Man. If his male brings trouble, he is not fit to rule. Therefore reason says—‘Let woman rule, and let her adopt all the pursuits of man, and let man assume the occupations of woman, since he has proved himself unfit for this present position’.” The King thinks it is a great and noble thought, and decrees that it shall be enforced from tomorrow.

Act II: In front of the Prime Minister’s house.

The Idea is being practised by all, the chorus (populace) hard at work, the boys doing the girls’ work and the girls doing the boys’. Mona is on sentry duty and Max the Sentry is doing Mona’s knitting. The Queen is struggling with some state documents, and the King is in charge of the royal household. The Prime Minister is busy sweeping with a large broom. Both the boys and the girls find themselves unequal to their tasks, and the ruling folk cannot agree as to whose word is to be obeyed. The Idea has caused mass confusion and discontent. The people begin to wonder whether this was really a good Idea after all. Everyone is arguing because others cannot do their new jobs; finally, in this dire situation, the Prime Minister comes up with another Idea: *Why not go back to the old state of things?*

All agree that since the Prime Minister’s first Idea was so very poor, this latest one should be his last. The aggravated populace is threatening revolt but they are appeased when it is promised that the old order will be restored. His notion so upset the entire situation that he promised that he’ll think no more.

Everyone is assured that the Prime Minister will never, never have another Idea.
Synopsis 5. The Youth's Choice op 11 (1902)

A Musical Idyll in one act
Characters: The Elder Sister, The Younger Sister, The Father, The Knight
Libretto: Gustav Holst
Source: original

Scene I: Evening. The Legend of the Youth's Choice

The Father is seen reading from the book on the table; it is a sad story of a knight who marries and takes his sobbing bride from her home and family to his castle. He tries to comfort her by saying she will see them again soon; she does not see them until they were lying on their deathbeds. The Father is saddened by the story and sings “Say, then, is’t not so? Hard our fate in life doth grow. Ne’er a joy have we on earth But when ‘tis wrapt in sorrow.” The Elder Sister comes in and, on hearing his words, contradicts him: “full of joy am I today, A bride am I tomorrow”. That is how the legend should run, she says, the other is false—the writer could have known nothing of love. Father reminds her that the old tales are still true and wise despite their age, and they gather strength with age.

The Elder Sister brings great news: her heroic knight is coming. He has won the jousting championships and will hold Father faithful to his word—to claim her as his bride. She need not be alone anymore, to live apart from her beloved. If Father is true to his promise then the Knight will be hers, and she will be his. Father assures her that he shall be hers: he gives his consent since he has proved himself a gallant knight. Yet Father is sad to lose his eldest child so soon. That is why the book speaks the truth. But she insists that joy reigns over all today.

The Younger Sister enters. She is wailing that she has been robbed of her flowers. Elder Sister asks for her forgiveness: she has taken them all to make herself a bride wreath. The Younger Sister is overjoyed; this means the Knight has been victorious, so now the wedding may go ahead. She feels great joy for her sister and wishes her all the best wherever she may go, and is happy that her flowers have become a bride wreath. She embraces her sister. Since neither she nor their Father has met him she asks her sister to speak of their story. The Elder Sister responds by saying that she “asks too much”. He will be here soon and they will know him; he is too wonderful to describe. All she longs for is tonight to be his bride forever.

Younger Sister reprimands her by asking is parting from home and family so easy? They have always been together until now. Yet how happily she leaves! Younger Sister reminds her what a wonderful
childhood they had together: “you were everything to me”. Now, but for Father, she is about to lose all.

Elder Sister is sorry to have brought sorrow upon her sister who, all their life, had brought her such joy. She tells her not to weep—they will see each other. Her new home is not far. She and Father will surely come often. It would be sad otherwise. She asks them not to forsake her. Father insists that he could never do that; he loves her too much.

But, he says, they have grown sad when all should be happiness. Would they like to hear a story? The sisters agree gladly. He asks them to choose a story. The Younger Sister goes to the book. After leafing through several pages she chooses the Tale of the Youth’s Choice. Father asks her to choose another—that story has no ending. But that is why she likes it—one can imagine one’s own ending. Please read it!

Father reads the tale: there was a Youth who lived in a land where all was night—no sun, moon or star shone. He carried a lamp to guide him through the gloom with which he was always safe. One day he came to a garden gate which was lovely within, with a rosy light shining out. He gazed eagerly through a niche. However, he could not enter the garden while he held the lamp. The Lamp flickered before the glow of the garden; it seemed worthless in comparison. Inside the garden were wondrous birds, strange beasts, and flowers. He yearned to enter the garden. So why keep the lamp? He wouldn’t need it anymore—there is light in the garden.

Father closes the book—there is no more to the story, the rest had been torn out ages ago. Even in his youth he remembers that it was so. Elder Sister is sure that the story must have continued with the Youth entering the garden. And he surely made the right choice—why would he need that lamp in the glorious glow? Father says he often wondered whether the Youth found joy and peace inside the garden. Were it not better to be out in the gloom not forsaking his lamp? He asks the Younger Sister her opinion. She is daydreaming, trying to imagine the Youth looking at all the wonderful things there through the gate-hole. All seems fair in that bright glow! She gets more excited as she tries to imagine it. She sees him trembling and faltering with excitement. But the lamp...

The Knight enters and greets them all. The Younger Sister gazes fixedly at him as the Elder Sister rushes forward to welcome her hero. How wearily had she waited for him! But now she can be happy for she is his. They embrace. Father greets him and welcomes him. He is impressed with his strength, bravery and handsome looks—a fit husband for his daughter. He introduces the Younger Sister as his new sister and beckons her to come and greet the Knight. He sees her and is spellbound. They remain staring at each other, struggling with their feelings. Finally the Younger Sister buries her face in her hands and weeps. [Curtain]
Scene II: Night.

[Curtain] The Younger Sister is sleeping in a chair near the table with the book open at her side. The Elder Sister is heard outside singing to herself about the resting place of her mother: how her mother sleeps in peace; darkness falls bringing sweet calm. But there is no calm now for herself since her love can love her no more. There is no peace now, only hate. Her mother cannot feel pain or sorrow any more, sleeping in her grave.

Father enters; he thought he heard the Younger Sister’s voice but realises that it is her sister singing, robbed of her love. Nothing is left now but singing and slumbering to lessen grief. Once the sisters were always together; they shared the same feelings. Now someone has come between them. With one glance did he shatter their joy! The feelings between the Younger Sister and the Knight were obvious to all in their look—no words were needed. Everyone went away from that scene to be alone and to think. No-one has spoken of it but cannot think of anything else.

Father goes round behind the sleeping Younger Sister. What had she been reading before she fell asleep?—the Tale of the Youth’s Choice. Why is the poor girl reading that? It is a good choice, for that book has often brought him comfort in times of trouble. May she find comfort in the book also and let it bring back joy. Until then, sleep on in peace amid sorrow. He listens and is sad to hear the Elder Sister singing her woeful song. He leaves; he will go and try to comfort her. May she be with her loved one again.

Younger Sister is dreaming. She starts in her sleep and calls out—the lamp! Where does it shine? She dreams that she is outside the garden with the wondrous light around her. The lamp is fading. How can she forsake her faithful lamp? Yet she is tempted by all the marvellous things in the garden. She struggles in her sleep—let me enter! For now, she would willingly yield up all that is dear to her.

The Knight enters and asks what is wrong. The Younger Sister wakes and speaks aloud of her dream: of entering the garden and forsaking her lamp. But the woe and terror of the dream... She sees the Knight and asks what brought him. He tells her that her cries were frightening so he quickly came to help. But now that they are together he asks to speak with her.

Until now his life was full of great happiness—always joy, hope and love. Coming today he rode happily, thinking of claiming his bride and loving her dearly. She will always be dear, tender and true to him, no matter what happens. If only he hadn’t met her Younger Sister. What does happiness matter now that he has seen her? Love without joy remains. Farewell to all they held dear. They are outcasts to all, save Death. She does not speak, yet he knows her feelings already. He begs her to come and embrace him. “All around us shines Love’s bright
“the Lamp!” Younger Sister suddenly springs up and cries out “the Lamp!” She remains as if in a trance—he draws back in surprise.

She speaks as if in a dream: now I know all. How can I forsake my faithful lamp? She turns and faces him resolutely. He has said enough: now he must listen to her, for they might never meet again. She bids him take care of his bride; never let her be sad. All his life he must atone for what he has said—for his folly and for his behaviour unfit for a knight. They will speak of this no more—it is over for good. We are now friends.

He does not understand. She is telling him that she loves him and yet... She tells him she loves him the way he loves her sister. Let her now hear him declare his love for her sister, truly and tenderly. The Knight says he wants to declare his love for the Elder Sister but it is difficult with her Younger Sister standing before him; he is her slave. She demands his proclamation. He does love the Elder Sister but asks the Younger Sister not to be angry with him. She stops his words. It is over. Closed is the gate and the lamp burns brightly. Proclaim it! Now the Elder Sister appears at the back and listens.

Knighthood, glory, conquest, riches, honour and pride. He would give up all these as a feeble love token to her whom his heart holds as a Bride for always! The Elder Sister hails her beloved and rushes forward to embrace him. She was foolish ever to doubt him. She has heard what he said and accepts his “bridal gift”. Will he take all she offers, paltry though it may seem—a poor maiden’s heart, her trust and love? All she hopes for is to be his bride from now and forever.

Father has entered. Outside in the courtyard horses are waiting to take the bride and groom to their home. It is time to part. He says goodbye to the Knight, telling him always to guard his daughter well. He then says goodbye to his child—do not be sad at parting; we will see each other soon. The Younger Sister goes to the Elder Sister and kisses her silently. Father notices the Younger Sister’s strange manner—full of sadness and wisdom. Why is she silent?

The Younger Sister goes slowly to the book and opens it. She has found the ending of the Tale of the Youth’s Choice. She wishes to tell it before they leave. Father thinks that this is not the time for telling stories, but the Elder Sister wishes to hear it, for her sister seems strange. The Younger Sister repeats the story as they all know it, but then continues: the Youth looked down at his faithful friend, the lamp, and turned away from the garden. Then she closes the book. How can she forsake her faithful lamp, shining so brightly in the darkness? The garden’s light is gloomy in comparison. Away from the garden—false are its joys. She will keep her lamp shining for ever. The sisters embrace; the Elder Sister bids farewell to her Younger Sister. She must leave now, but she does not understand her sister’s meaning. The Knight understands, saying that
the meaning is a secret—she can never learn it. He speaks to the Younger Sister, asking for some sweet word before he goes. She holds up her hand to him, as if in warning. The Knight kneels, kisses her hand and rises. The Elder Sister bids goodbye to her Father. As she is finally leaving her Younger Sister runs to her and embraces her once again. The couple leave.

The Younger Sister gazes after them and then turns sorrowfully away. She goes to her Father who holds out his arms to receive her. She weeps silently. Father comforts her, kisses her forehead and says, “Truly the Youth’s Choice was good.”

Synopsis 6. Sita, op 23 (1899-1906)

Opera in three acts
Characters: Earth, Sita, Rama, Lakshman, Ravana, Surpanakha, Maritta, chorus of Rakshas, chorus of soldiers, chorus of the voices of the Earth.

Libretto: Gustav Holst
Source: The Ramayana.

Prologue
In the jungle Mother Earth is enthroned and is praying to Vishnu for protection from the Dread Lord Ravana. She asks him to come to earth in the form of a man who will destroy Ravana, but know nothing of his godhead. Her prayer is answered.

Act I
In the deep ravine in the forest of Dandaka the warrior Lakshman is battling with rakshas, the followers of Ravana. He is surrounded by them and calls to his brother Rama for help. Together they continue to fight and Lakshman is struck down. Rama succeeds in driving off the rakshas. Thinking that his brother has been killed Rama laments, saying that they had none but each other. He prays to Indra, to the Sun and to Mother Earth to send him a comrade, a helper, now that he is alone.

He feels Mother Earth responding to his prayer and sees Sita, the daughter of the Earth, rise up out of the ground. Voices of the Earth sing of Sita being Rama’s new comrade and Mother Earth exhorts them to be faithful to one another. After their mission is accomplished she will take her daughter back to her bosom. Sita addresses Rama as his comrade by divine decree. She is the daughter of one who loves him well: Mother Earth. Rama is grateful but warns her of the dangers that await her: life in the wilderness without shelter or guardians. Sita tells him that her home is with the creatures of the forest and with Rama and his protection. There is, however, one condition to their union; she can only be where there is trust and faithfulness. He must never doubt her lest she be called back to the Earth. Rama proclaims that he could never doubt her and asks for her love.
Rama discovers Lakshman’s body behind a rock; he is only wounded. Sita prays to her Mother to restore him to health and he comes back to life. Lakshman rejoices at the news that Rama has found a wife, and he swears loyalty to her. The three agree to travel together to the valley of Panchavati.

Surpanakha, sister of Ravana, suddenly appears and declares that she is the enemy of Rama. She is a raksha, angry that he has conquered her people. When Ravana finds out who has slain so many rakshas he will kill Rama. Surpanakha claims that she is more worthy of being Rama’s bride and tries to tempt him with promises of sharing her kingdom. All fear her, but she will be an obedient wife who will crawl and cringe before him. Rama spurns her, comparing her offer of crawling and cringing to the behaviour of a dog. Lakshman threatens her if she dare harm either Rama or Sita. The three leave.

Enraged, Surpanakha calls to her brother, demanding vengeance, and Ravana appears. She orders him to slay Rama and Lakshman. Upon hearing the name of Rama he hesitates. Surpanakha slyly suggests that Sita would make the perfect bride for him. She will have her vengeance—Rama and Lakshman as her slaves—and he will take Sita. Ravana agrees.

Act II

In the vale of Panchavati before the hut in which Rama and Sita live. Maritcha, general of the rakshas, tells his rabble of Ravana’s struggle with Indra and how Ravana conquered Indra taking him prisoner to his kingdom of Lanka. Ravana and Surpanakha appear. Ravana tells of the insult to his sister and declares war. He exhorts his army to capture the three, make slaves of Rama and Lakshman and give him Sita as bride. Maritcha is fearful and begs Ravana for an “easier” task. This angers Ravana who orders them to obey. He says that Rama and Sita are asleep in the hut and that Lakshman is out hunting in the forest. Ravana says that Lakshman has seen a fawn with gold skin and wishes to catch it; his chase will take him further away from the hut. The fawn is actually a raksha in disguise. He will faint and fall. Likewise will Rama be taken. They are to be bound and delivered as slaves to his sister; then Sita will be his. The sun begins to rise and they disperse in all directions.

Day breaks and Sita emerges from the hut. She sings to the rising sun, the source of all creation. She greets Rama. Lakshman returns from the hunt empty-handed. They all greet and sing praises to the sun. Suddenly Sita sees a fawn with gold skin and Lakshman says it is the very one he had been chasing all night. She asks Rama to bring it to her. As he agrees Lakshman warns that it is perilous. Sita quickly changes her mind and asks Rama not to go, but Rama cannot accept that any challenge is beyond his strength and skill and decides to go after it. Upon leaving he orders the two to stay together for safety. Sita asks Lakshman how he
came to see the fawn. He describes his hazardous chase through forests and mountains. He sank down wearily but vaguely remembers grinning, hideous faces and laughter, shrieks and groans. At the thought of Rama and Sita he sprang up and immediately returned home.

Suddenly they hear a cry for help; Lakshman is certain that it is Rama. Yells of laughter are heard from unseen rakshas and Lakshman stops himself from going. He is sure that Rama could not be hurt, but Sita hears the continuing cries to Lakshman and is convinced that it is Rama. She tries to make Lakshman go; he refuses, saying no power could overthrow Rama. Also he has promised not to leave Sita alone.

She accuses Lakshman of cowardice and he claims that he is neither cowardly nor a fool. She begs him for one more favour: his sword and spear, so that she may go to Rama and die by his side. Lakshman tries to persuade her otherwise. He would not hesitate to go if Rama were truly in danger but it is not he. Rama would not cry out like that. Lakshman knows that it is a raksha’s cry. They struggle and she pulls away from him, calling him a coward and miscreant, worse than all the rakshas. She accuses him of planning all of this in order to kill Rama and claim her for himself. Sita swears that if Rama is dead then Lakshman will follow. Tired of the insults, Lakshman decides to go. He reminds her that Rama trusts him implicitly; would Rama trust a coward? He tells her not to leave until Rama appears.

Alone now Sita hears yells of wild laughter. Ravana enters disguised as a pilgrim, weary and wishing to rest nearby awhile. She welcomes him. He asks her who her husband is and where he is now. She tells him that he is out hunting a fawn, that he cried out for help and that his brother has gone to help him. The “pilgrim” is amazed that someone like Rama would need help while hunting. Suddenly things don’t seem right to Sita. The pilgrim starts to speak of a husband for Sita who has wealth and power; she would not have to live in a hut, but shall see her husband on a throne. She would be his queen. He continues with his lofty descriptions, saying that before nightfall she will be in his kingdom. Sita asks again and again about Rama. Ravana continues to describe himself and with horror she suddenly realises that he is not speaking of Rama at all.

Ravana throws off his pilgrim’s cloak to reveal his true identity, claiming her as his bride. Sita calls for Rama to help her but is told that no-one will hear her. The fawn, the cries for help to Lakshman, the laughter she heard were all rakshas doing his bidding. She shall soon see Rama and Lakshman as slaves to his sister. Sita claims that, all-powerful though he is, he cannot touch the wife of Rama. Ravana tells her that she speaks in vain. Will she come with him or be bound and taken as a slave? Sita prays to the Earth and Sun to take a message to Rama, telling him how Ravana tricked and kidnapped her. She utters a curse on him, saying that Yama—Death—hovers above his head. Ravana utters a command to the Darkness and Sita falls, senseless. He calls his rakshas
together, announcing that he now has a bride and is returning to Lanka. A chariot with winged horses appears in the distance to take them away.

Act III, scene 1

On the banks of the torrent overlooking Lanka Rama cries out for Sita after receiving the message of Sita’s kidnapping, and prays to know where she is. Animals, birds and even the wind indicate south. He thanks Mother Earth for the sign and heads south. The raging river bars his way and there is no path. He continues to call for divine guidance.

Surpanakha appears but Rama does not recognise her right away. She says that she has heard his cries; she is a friend who wants to help him. He spurned her once but she offers him again her power and magic. He realises who she is and demands to know of Sita and Lakshman. She tells him that a band of men are following Lakshman as he looks for Rama. Soon they will be here. Sita is alive but would be better off dead.

Rama asks her to help him but she says it would be better if he not see Sita. Surpanakha claims that Sita no longer loves him or thinks of him. She is now Ravana’s wife. Rama believes that Sita is captured and the rest is lies. She insists and Rama then demands proof. Surpanakha takes him to the bank of the torrent and points across. The rakshas of Lanka are celebrating their new queen.

Rama calls to Lakshman that Sita is near and rushes off to find him. Surpanakha is suddenly sorry that she divulged Sita’s whereabouts, but no matter. Anything Rama tries will not work and he will be hers. As she leaves she gloats that Rama will see Sita as the queen of Lanka.

Rama and Lakshman enter and decide how to cross the raging torrent below. Lakshman’s men enter with tree trunks and tools in order to build a bridge over the river. Rama promises that the rakshas will perish this night and he calls to Sita to have courage.

Act III, scene 2

In the kingdom of Lanka Sita is asleep on the ground. Surpanakha enters and wakens her. She has news: Rama is coming and soon Sita will see her husband again. She must take Sita to the palace where there is a gown that Sita must wear that is worthy of greeting her husband. Sita agrees. Suddenly Ravana appears and threatens her once more with his ultimatum. Sita calls to Rama to avenge this insult. Surpanakha drags Sita into the palace.

In the distance men are heard hammering and singing, as they build the bridge. Ravana discovers that a bridge is being built and sees Rama; he knows that if Rama reaches him there will be a glorious fight. He calls
his warriors to bring their swords and shields—a glorious enemy approaches.

Ravana demands that Sita come to him. She appears on the palace balcony in a jewelled robe wearing the Raksha seal on her forehead. He tells her that Rama is getting closer; he is building a bridge to reach her. Soon he will be here, and then she will see who is truly more powerful. Ravana summons the Darkness. Darkness falls and the hammering and singing suddenly stop. Ravana calls out what is keeping you Rama? A welcome you shall have in Lanka that no-one has ever had before. Here is the Dread One awaiting your coming.

Sita begins to sing to the rising sun and slowly light appears. As the day breaks the hammering in the distance begins again. A duet ensues in which Sita calls to the Light and Ravana to the Darkness. However Ravana’s invocation produces no effect and the daylight grows brighter as the chorus of bridge builders continues. Daylight increases, and the finished bridge is seen across the river. Sita’s invocation continues and soon broad daylight covers all. Rama appears and motions to the others to stay back; he comes forward. He challenges Ravana to fight and they engage in combat. They move to the edge of the torrent. Ravana receives a blow and staggers. One final blow sends him over the edge to his death. The rakshas are hysterical with fright at the death of their leader.

Lakshman and his men join Rama, chanting that he is Lord of Lanka now. Surpanakha comes out of the palace, telling Rama that she brings him his bride—the queen of the rakshas. Sita calls to Rama, and he is glad to hear her voice—a poor prisoner who is faithful to him. He turns to see her and is horrified by her manner of dress. He turns away, declaring that she has betrayed him as she begs “don’t you remember me?” Rama sarcastically tells her that he is looking for a poor prisoner. She warns him of the promise not to doubt her. He demands proof that it is Sita; all he sees is the seal of the Rakshas.

She tears off the seal and the jewels. “You do not know me. Then faith is dead. Dead, too, is hope. Love is dead. I am alone”. The voices of the Earth are heard calling to Sita, and she says it is the voice of her Mother giving her comfort. The voices get nearer. Daylight pales as Mother Earth, enthroned, rises up from below. She stares at Surpanakha who staggers and falls dead. “Thus the false ones perish before me.”

Earth then speaks to Rama, saying that she brings proof of Sita’s faithfulness, beckoning Sita to return to her. Rama tries to change Earth’s words but is reminded of his early vow which has now been broken. She tells Rama that there is One even greater than she—Vishnu the Preserver. Ravana was Earth’s enemy. No other god could destroy Ravana so she cried out for help to Vishnu to come as a man knowing nothing of his godhead to destroy Ravana.
Now all has been fulfilled. The deed proclaims Rama a mortal, “yet in they bosom dwelleth the spirit upholding creation.” She reveals that he is the incarnation of Vishnu, Preserver of All. Mother Earth beckons to Sita who goes to her and kneels down. Earth covers her with her mantle. “Thou shalt be one with me.” They sink slowly down into the earth.

Synopsis 7.  **Sāvītrī, op 25 (1909)**

Characters:  Sāvītrī, Satyavān, Death.
Libretto:  Gustav Holst
Source:  a story from the third book of the *Mahābhārata.*

In a wood at evening Death (unseen) is heard calling to Sāvītrī, telling her that he is drawing near and is coming to take her husband, Satyavān. Sāvītrī enters, in agony, being tortured day and night by the voice of Death, which gives her no rest. She cannot believe that Satyavān, so strong and fearless, will be struck down. Suddenly she hears her husband’s voice in the distance; he is returning home after cutting wood in the forest, oblivious to his impending doom.

He sees that she is pale and trembling and asks what is wrong. She tells him of the fear that she feels in the forest. He tells her that it is all the work of Māyā, or Illusion, and that there is nothing to fear. Sāvītrī is inconsolable and discloses that “he” is coming. Thinking that she refers to the approach of some mortal enemy Satyavān raises his axe and demands that the intruder show himself. She tries to stop his wrath but cannot. Suddenly he staggers and drops the axe. In the distance the cloaked figure of Death is visible.

Satyavān calls to Sāvītrī for help; he feels his strength draining away. She runs to support him as he falls, assuring him that her love and her thoughts are with him, protecting him. He dies in her arms. As Death continues to approach she feels the forest darkening around her. Death is beside her now, announcing his presence. But rather than being fearful Sāvītrī welcomes him as the “Just One” and acknowledges his holiness. Death is moved and praises her own holiness; she is one with whom the gods may dwell.

Sāvītrī invites him into her home; what could be better than being with one of the Holy Ones? He refuses: he is the one who leads men onwards. But before he leaves, taking Satyavān with him, he grants Sāvītrī a “boon” for not shrinking in fear from him and welcoming him into her home. But the boon must be for herself only; she is to ask nothing for Satyavān for he is lost to her.

She answers in anger that she wants nothing without having her husband. Death is about to depart when she suddenly reconsiders and asks Death to grant her “life”. Life is the path she wishes to travel wherein flowers would spring up around her. Sāvītrī continues to speak of her stalwart
sons and bright-eyed daughters carrying life on through the ages. She tells Death that he works alone; Death is only for the moment, but Life is eternal, greater than Death.

Death is moved by her song and joyfully grants her “Life in all its fullness”. She triumphantly announces that Death, whose word rules all, has granted her life—the life of woman, of wife, of mother. If Satyavan dies then all is mute, her feet may not travel the path. Life in all its fullness for her is not possible without her husband: Death cannot take Satyavan with him. With this Savitri commands Death to be true to his word and go back to his kingdom alone.

She bends over the body of Satyavan and calls him to return to her. He awakens and says that he has just had a terrible dream; he had been in the grip of Mâyâ and thought that a threatening stranger had come. Savitri tells him that a Holy One had been there and had blessed her. They are reunited in mutual devotion, and move off together into the wood. Death retreats after his defeat; he is returning to his kingdom alone after having been conquered by one who knows Life, someone free from Mâyâ. He realises that even he himself—Death—is an illusion.


Opera in one act
Characters: The Fool, his Mother, the Wizard, the Princess, the Troubadour, the Traveller, a Peasant, Three Girls, the Troubadour’s retainers.  
Also: Chorus of Courtiers and Subjects of the Princess; Ballet of Spirits of Earth, Spirits of Water, and Spirits of Fire.
Libretto: Gustav Holst
Source: Text by Gustav Holst.

It is night time and the wizard is performing a magic rite. He summons the Spirits of the Earth to bring him a cup for working magic. He then summons the Spirits of the Water, demanding that they bring him the sweetest essence of Love so that he may fill the cup. Finally the Spirits of Fire are summoned, and he asks them to dwell, burning, within the cup. When he has cast the spell he bids the Spirits farewell and settles down to sleep.

The Mother approaches, dragging the Fool behind her; the Fool settles down and falls asleep. She speaks of their homeless wanderings, that they are outcasts, but recalls that when her son was born wise men came to her and said “he wins a bride with a glance of his eye; with a look he kills a foe. He achieves where others fail, with one word”. She complains of her idle, half-witted son who cares for no one. When he is awake he is yawning—if he is not yawning then he is sleeping. She tries to wake him but to no avail.
She spies the Wizard, tries to wake him to ask for his help. Angrily the Wizard exclaims that no man is permitted to see his face or hear his voice lest they suffer terrible tortures. Mother points out the fact that she is a woman. The Wizard did not notice that and, as he says, it is lucky for if there were a man present he would go up in flames. She attempts to conceal the sleeping form of the Fool.

The Wizard recalls that he has not yet drunk the potion that he had concocted for himself. He explains to her that the potion, only if drunk by a man, is all-powerful: the first woman he looks at falls hopelessly in love with him, forgetting everything else. He is planning to wait to drink the potion when he sees the Princess. The Wizard tells the Mother that the Princess is coming today to choose a worthy husband. There is an ancient prophecy that reads "She shall marry the man who does the deed no other can do". At this the Mother recalls what was told to her at the birth of her foolish son and is convinced that the prophecy refers to him. But the Wizard is certain that he will fulfil it because of his potion. She examines her son and is relieved to see that he is not burnt. Daylight is breaking and she is finding it increasingly difficult to keep the Fool hidden.

The Wizard next rehearses his wooing song and enlists the Mother’s help. She must pretend that she is the Princess. He strikes a pose and delivers his ridiculously exaggerated speech. Exhausted, he decides to take a rest, telling Mother to keep watch and to wake him when the Princess arrives. Mother examines both the Wizard and her son while thinking of the prophecy “With a look he kills a foe”. In the meantime three girls come in from a distance, each one bearing a pitcher and they go to the well. They sing a round in praise of Water and they draw water from the well. Mother remembers the words of the Wizard, who had said that the potion is in taste and colour as pure as water. Making sure that the Wizard is asleep she takes the cup of potion and, holding the Fool’s head, pours the potion down his throat, and then carefully replaces the cup.

A crowd begins to gather, and the Princess arrives, accompanied by her entourage and heralded by trumpets. She repeats the prophecy of her marriage: “I must marry the man who does the deed no other can do.” Today is her wedding day and she must choose her mate. Mother awakens the Wizard who comes forward. He asks the Princess if she looks for a husband, and begins to sing the praises of one whom he knows well who would be perfect for her, revealing then that it is he. She promptly informs him that he is too old and ugly and she would never consent. Wizard then claims that he is about to transform himself with the potion and drinks from the cup which Mother has refilled with water. He begins again with another florid speech, confident that he has changed completely. He approaches, but is stopped by her courtiers. He threatens them with evil spells, but they simply laugh. He doesn’t
understand what has gone wrong. Mother taunts him, saying that a man such as he with a woman like that—it wouldn't be proper! He is infuriated and needs to be held back by the men. Swearing vengeance he tears away and runs off to the great hilarity of all.

As the crowd gathers around singing praises to the Princess a Troubadour arrives, intent on wooing her. All his florid singing leaves her unimpressed, and she sends him off with advice on improving his singing. She is barely rid of him when a Traveller appears with the same goal in mind. His highly and chromatic and alliterative nonsense annoys her and she turns him down as well. He moves away, stumbling over the Fool who wakes. The first person he sees is the Princess, and the spell works. She stares spellbound at him and walks over to him as if in a trance. To everyone's shock and horror she sings of her overwhelming love for the Fool. As he begins to fall asleep Mother shakes him to stay awake. Both the Troubadour and the Traveller swear that they will win her somehow; obviously she must have been bewitched. The Princess simply stares adoringly at the sleeping Fool, while the crowd, annoyed with the Traveller ad the Troubadour, drive them away.

A shepherd suddenly rushes in to tell of great danger—a war is beginning and the Enemy advances. All the bewitched Princess has to say is that she is not afraid of earthly power; danger cannot reach her. The shepherd tells the story of how the war began and what he saw. The land is doomed. In spite of all the pleas for the Princess to flee to safety she refuses: earthly things are naught, she is in heaven. The people suggest taking the Fool and the Princess will follow. Mother tells everyone else to go, but leave the Fool. “He has won a bride with a glance of his eye; with a look he kills a foe.” Therefore they are safe with him. The people shout their call to arms and threaten the Fool who is the cause of all their trouble. The Princess and Mother demand that they leave him alone: how could they kill the one who can save them?

Refugees from the burning villages pour in as the crowd prepares itself for battle. Soldiers, trumpeters and drummers appear. Flames approach from all sides and Spirits of Fire dance all around urged on by the Wizard. Everyone flees except the Princess, the Fool and his Mother. She wakens him and he tries to run away; the Princess, oblivious to all around her, kneels at his feet and holds his legs. Mother holds his head forcing him to look at the Wizard. The Spirits of Fire turn on the Wizard and he is engulfed in flames. Only his hat is left standing upright on the ground. The fire disappears. Mother is ecstatic, “He has won a bride with a glance of his eye, With a look he has killed a foe!”

The chorus (i.e. the crowd carefully reappears, wondering what has happened to the fire. The Princess reproaches everyone for thinking her bewitched and leaving her in danger. She turns to the Fool, asking him to tell her that he loves her—all other men mean nothing to her, they weary
her. She implores him, and finally asks “Do you love me?” The Fool is awake and answers with a resounding “NO!”

All are stunned and ready to avenge their princess. Mother stops them—she has one more thing to say: both legends have come true. “He has achieved where others failed, with one word” The Fool is the only man who has ever looked at the Princess and not loved her. Now that the ancient legends have revealed themselves there is general rejoicing. Priests enter; the Chief Priest carries a crown solemnly to the Fool. Just as he is about to crown the Fool the latter yawns to the general embarrassment of the people. The Fool yawns again, and falls asleep.

Synopsis 9. *At the Boar’s Head*, op 42 (1924)

A Musical Interlude in one act, founded on old English melodies.

Characters: Falstaff, Prince Hal, Poins, Bardolph, Peto, Gadshill, Pistol, Hostess (Dame Quickly), Doll Tearsheet.

Libretto: Gustav Holst (arranger)

Source: Shakespeare, *Henry IV* part two (tavern scenes)

(Holst wrote the following synopsis for the programme of the first performance at Manchester in 1925.)

‘Bardolph, Gadshill and Peto are singing and drinking in an upper room in the “Boar’s Head Tavern”, Eastcheap, in the late afternoon. Falstaff enters and calls for sack. He is followed by Prince Hal and Poins whom he accuses of cowardice. They had failed to back him in a highway robbery that he and his men had attempted that morning. He tells the tale of his exploits with much embroidery until the Prince reveals that it was he and Poins who had set on and robbed Falstaff of money stolen from some unarmed travellers a little earlier.

The hostess [Dame Quickly] announces that a gentleman from the court awaits below. Falstaff and the others go off leaving Prince Hal alone. In a soliloquy the latter likens himself in his present condition to the sun who allows the clouds to cover up his glory, so—

‘That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at.’

Falstaff and the others return and tell him that civil war has broken out and that, before he returns to Court, he had better practice [sic] an answer to the King, his father. Hal does so, and Falstaff impersonates the King, after which they exchange parts, Hal being King and Falstaff the Prince.

Doll Tearsheet enters, and Hal and Poins disguise themselves in order to watch her and Falstaff. Falstaff calls for a song and Hal (disguised) sings one of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, “Devouring Time, blunt thou the fion’s
paws'. However, as the words deal chiefly with the ravages of Time upon the human face, they annoy Falstaff who interrupts with an old ballad, 'When Arthur First in Court Began'. The two songs continue simultaneously as twilight sets in. A distant march is heard which presently draws nearer as Bardolph rushes in calling on Prince Hal to come at once to the Court at Westminster. Hal and Poinx throw off their disguises and march off amid the shouts of the crowd outside.

Pistol's voice is heard calling on Falstaff. In spite of Doll, who is angry, and the Hostess who is nervous for the good name of her inn, he is admitted. He quarrels violently with Doll and has to be thrown out.

Bardolph announces that a dozen captains are knocking at the taverns asking for Falstaff. After bidding farewell, Falstaff and Bardolph march away to the war leaving the two women in tears; a situation that is relieved when presently Bardolph puts his head through the door and whispers, "Bid Mistress Tearsheet come to my master", whereupon the curtain falls' (quoted in Holst, I., 1974a: 154-55).

**Synopsis 10: The Wandering Scholar, op 50 (1930)**

Chamber opera in one act.
Characters: Louis (a farmer), Alison (his wife), Father Philippe, and Pierre, a Wandering Scholar.
Libretto: Clifford Bax
Source: an incident in *The Wandering Scholars* by Helen Waddell (a collection of French folk tales)
Setting: France; a farmhouse in the thirteenth century.

We are in the home of Louis and his young wife Alison. Louis goes to town for provisions since Alison has told him there is nothing in the house to eat. As soon as he is out of sight Alison prepares to entertain the priest Father Philippe. She produces an almond cake, a bottle of burgundy, and some pork in the pot. When the Father arrives he is obviously interested in more than a meal and, just as the two are about to ascend to the attic bedroom, a young scholar named Pierre arrives at the door, begging for food.

Alison takes a liking to him, but Father Philippe wants to get rid of him. She insists that there is nothing in the house to eat. Pierre tells them his story: how he had to leave the university where he was learning Latin and Greek. He has no more money and must beg for his supper. The priest cannot abide this any longer and drives Pierre away. The two
decide to carry on where they left off, but suddenly they hear Louis returning, accompanied by Pierre. In a panic Alison quickly hides the food and drink, while the fat priest conceals himself under a bale of straw. Pierre does not ask for food but is suddenly in the mood for telling a story...

On his way he met a swineherd whose pigs were as fine and plump as...the pork in the pot over there. Louis is infuriated on finding food in the house when he was told otherwise and Alison feigns amazement at the sight of it. Pierre continues. He saw a wolf glaring at a sow, and he picked up a stone just as big and round as... the delicious cake that lies concealed behind that cupboard door.

Pierre continues. He took up the stone and threw it at the wolf, hitting him in the belly, and the blood flowed as red as... that bottle of burgundy that’s hid by the cake. Each time Alison acts amazed at how there was no food in the house until Pierre arrived: “he’s a wizard!” Pierre finishes his fable by saying that he followed them and found the wolf glaring at him angrily, and that his eyes looked just like the eyes of the blackguardly priest who lies concealed under that heap of straw!

Louis angrily drives the priest from the house and then invites Pierre to supper. As the guilty Alison tries to join them she is told that there will be no supper for her—her punishment awaits her.
Appendix IV: Score Facsimile Sit 1
Appendix IV: Score Facsimile Sita 2
Appendix IV: Score Facsimile Sita 3
Appendix IV: Score Facsimile Sita 4