

William Morris and Gustav Holst's *Fantasia on The Dargason*

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'I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.'

William Morris.¹

William Morris's famous maxim was read by Gustav Holst in the last decade of the nineteenth century and formed a life-long philosophy.² Morris's model for life and art, in fact, was fully incorporated into Holst's *Second Suite in F* for military band, composed in 1911. The suite's final movement, *Fantasia on the Dargason*, can specifically be read as a translation of Morris's coupling of art and freedom, while incorporating a reinforcing mix of compatible ideologies and materials.

Beloved by anyone who has played in a high school or college band, the *Fantasia* is relatively unknown outside the world of wind performance. This is unfortunate since this composition emblemizes the most deeply held of Holst's convictions about politics, community, spirituality, the purpose of art, and the necessity for peace and brotherhood. Initially, this may seem an overzealous claim for such a short, repetitive, straightforward, and even artless movement that languishes in the minor genre of the band suite. However, it is the very simplicity and humbleness of the work that crystallises Holst's most fundamental attitudes, and his debt to Morris.

Morris's philosophy and work provides the central piece in an ideological jigsaw that underpins the *Fantasia*. Though the facts are familiar, perhaps it is worth reviewing Holst's personal connection to Morris. The artistic and socialist ideal of William Morris attracted Holst in his youth. Holst became personally acquainted with Morris in 1895 and many of Holst's early musical activities promoted Morris's aesthetic and socialist agendas. Holst set Morris's poems to music, conducted the Hammersmith Choir, and even occasionally was seen playing the harmonium on the back of a cart that was distributing *Commonweal*, Morris's socialist newspaper. The slow movement of Holst's early *Cotswold Symphony* is an elegy on the death of Morris in 1896. And his late Prelude and Scherzo *Hammersmith* recalls musically the area of London in which Holst's socialist education took place.

Though Morris's political and economic stances seem to have fallen away from Holst as he matured, Morris's philosophy exerted an ever more powerful hold on Holst's approach to life and music, as Vaughan Williams attested in 1920:

. . . to him the ideals of Morris, the insistence on beauty in every detail of human life and work were a revelation. No wonder then that the poetic socialism of the Kelmscott Club became the natural medium of his aspirations; . . . 'comradeship' was no pose but an absolute necessity of life. . . It is this almost mystical sense of unity which is the secret of Holst's power as a teacher.³

The explicit dovetailing of 'comradeship' and 'mystical unity' represents the fundamental connection between Morris's socialist ideals and Holst's interest in eastern religion, both of which inspire the composition. Holst was one of a number of utopians who believed that unity and brotherhood could be created through spiritual and political means.⁴ And conjoining the two allowed Holst to find a means of engaging esoteric spiritual doctrines with the political and cultural dilemmas of early twentieth century Britain.

Morris's belief in simple objects that were beautifully made from native materials was the guiding principle for Holst's use of folksong in the *Second Suite*, the first three movements of which incorporate seven folk songs from Hampshire. The *Fantasia*, the fourth movement, continues the use of folk song by using the Irish folk song the *Dargason* with *Greensleeves* in counterpoint. Morris's work provided Holst with a model for how an artist could translate philosophy into artworks, and invest the simple, folk-like surface with lofty philosophical significance. By this means Holst brought his spiritual beliefs, which overlapped with socialist notions of comradeship, into a musical frame that valued simplicity and folk authenticity.

Insofar as the *Fantasia* has excited scholarly interest, it is the combination of the *Dargason* folk melody with *Greensleeves* that has provoked comment. The composer's daughter, Imogen Holst, for example, terms the combination 'the perfect marriage of contrasted folk tunes',⁵ while Holst's biographer, Michael Short, believes the blending to be a 'contrapuntal *tour de force*'.⁶ If these encomia seems overtly enthusiastic, nevertheless, the contrapuntal combination does provide the musical gateway to understanding Holst's intent for the movement and the underlying social issues expressed in the work.

Greensleeves and the *Dargason* occupy special places in the English and Irish musical landscapes. *Greensleeves* is virtually the national anthem of England, with a history that recalls England's days as a 'green and pleasant land'. The melody is so pervasive that every English citizen would have known it. The *Dargason* doesn't occupy a comparable canonical position to *Greensleeves*, but is clearly identifiable as an Irish tune type, a jig, and is quite closely related to the first half of the widely known double jig, *Irish Washerwoman*.⁷ Combining the two musically represents separate national musical characters working 'in harmony' in a single musical fabric.

This analysis suggests the social purpose of the composition. Holst composed the *Fantasia* to express a philosophy of national cooperation and brotherhood at a time when Home Rule for Ireland, Irish independence, and anti-British rhetoric were very much a part of the political scene. There are three general reasons to suppose that such a view is correct: the aesthetics of Vaughan Williams, the political climate of the British Isles in 1911, and, as has been outlined above,

Holst's personal views on the brotherhood of man which he derived from Hindu sources and from the utopian socialism of William Morris.

A single piece of documentary evidence exists to support this claim, and it is second-hand, albeit from the family circle. Imogen Holst's analysis of the *Fantasia* posits that the tunes seem to be 'specially intended for each other: they live their own lives, each leaning to the other *instead of fighting for independence* (italics added).⁸ Holst, so it seems, revealed more about the extramusical purpose of the *Fantasia* to his daughter than he did to the world.

For Vaughan Williams and Holst, folk songs created a national musical tradition that was identifiably English, and brought the diverse members of the British population together into a sense of community.⁹ Holst would have been most familiar with Vaughan Williams's views since he and Vaughan Williams were composing partners, and critiqued the other's works. In a letter to Holst in 1916, Vaughan Williams outlined the kind of community that could and hopefully would be created:

. . . after the war England will be a *better* place for music than before – largely because we shan't be able to buy expensive performers. . . We don't take music as part of our every-day life half enough – I often wish we could all migrate to some small town where there could really be a musical community. . .¹⁰

In other words, music performed by amateurs in a small town as a part of the natural course of daily life constituted the ideal. Holst's *Second Suite* could be said to have been specifically composed for such a paradise.

In this sense the *Fantasia* can be viewed as a composition that was calculated to create or enhance a sense of community, and to make the music accessible to non-professionals. The folk songs from Hampshire establish a connection to everyday life of the common folk. The instrumentation of the suite, for military band, was suitable for community concerts, village events, and outdoor gatherings, as well as military functions. In fact, Holst revised the instrumentation following the 1921 Kneller Hall conference that was convened to establish a minimum band instrumentation. That is, Holst adapted the instrumentation so as to be accessible to standard, or even amateur, groups. The minimum instrumentation was set at the surprisingly small number of twenty, an ensemble that would be available in many communities. When we consider the harmonic language that Holst employs, which is cast in a much more accessible and familiar harmonic idiom than the works that surround it (all of which use plentiful chromaticism, and in places venture into atonality), it becomes apparent that Holst aimed the *Second Suite* at the general community, rather than the highbrow concert audience. All these decisions echo Morris's dictum that 'art for a few' was unacceptable, and especially so in a composition that also advocated the end of 'freedom for a few'.

Vaughan Williams's notion of musical community was more nationalistic and insular than Holst's. Witness his jingoistic support for a five-year ban on foreign music in Britain in a lecture from 1934.¹¹ Holst, who followed Morris's socialist internationalism and believed in the brotherhood of mankind, felt that a broader community could be appealed to, certainly not limited only to Ireland

and England, though that is its explicit purpose at this particular political moment.

Holst undoubtedly would have known of the political tension between Ireland and England at this time. Though the Birrell administration of Ireland (which began in 1907) established a superficial peace in Ireland until 1914, the British rule of the majority of Ireland was on its last legs at the time of the composition of Holst's *Second Suite*. The Irish Republican Brotherhood and Clan na Gael were active as political forces for an independent Ireland and the rebellion of 1916 was heralded in the first decade of the twentieth century, both in action and in rhetoric. The decade 1900-1910 witnessed a search for political solutions to the Home Rule question and the issue of Irish independence. Anti-British rhetoric was common during this decade and manoeuvring amongst various Irish factions, including the Brotherhood, Clan na Gael, political parties, and Unionists also marked the period. It is clear that the political will to rebel had been in place throughout the time Holst composed the *Second Suite*.¹²

There is clear evidence that Holst responded musically to political strife, especially during the period preceding the Great War. Holst's most famous work, *The Planets* includes themes of armed conflict among people in its first two movements *Mars, the Bringer of War*, and *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*. *Mars* was completed just as World War I began, and confirms in a most explicit way that Holst would find musical inspiration in the world's political events. This practice was rendered even more subtly in the *Fantasia* three years earlier.

Moreover, the fact that at this same moment Holst was exploring the mystical view of the unity of all life also has an important bearing on his compositions of this period. Holst had read the *Bhagavad-gita* in 1899 and was immediately inspired to study Sanskrit. During the period 1906-1912 he composed almost nothing but works derived from Sanskrit texts or Hindu subjects. This period saw the completion of the opera *Sita* and the composition of the *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* and the opera *Savitri*. Of course, Hinduism's doctrine is the mystic unity of all life. Inspired by Holst's researches into astrology, *The Planets* (1916) continues the stream of mystical compositions.

Since the works that surround the *Second Suite* are so centrally involved with the themes of conflict and unity among peoples, mysticism and brotherhood, the *Second Suite* can be viewed as very much of a piece with the Sanskrit and astrological compositions. In fact it stands as a coded exposition of these ideas. But more importantly, the suite can be seen as an attempt to *induce* the philosophy of brotherhood rather than simply to present it. From this perspective the suite was designed as a vehicle for extending Vaughan Williams's notion of creating an English community through folk music, to creating a cooperative of the British Isles through the symbolic combination of *Greensleeves* and the *Dargason*. This returns us to the initial 'overzealous' claim for the composition, which now requires a more radical reassessment. It is *only* through simplicity and approachability that Holst felt he could achieve his purpose, and Morris's artistic philosophy provided the model for the simplicity and unity of the *Fantasia*.

While there is little documentary evidence that Holst conceived the *Fantasia* as an overt political or philosophical or spiritual statement, the circumstantial evidence as it has been recapitulated here, shows that this was his intention. When

we consider the two folk songs he chose, their specific national identities, Vaughan Williams's aesthetics, Holst's philosophical and musical interest in mysticism and socialism, the explicit musical response to strife in *The Planets*, and the state of English/Irish political relations, a single conclusion becomes self-evident: in the *Fantasia*, Holst was appealing for cooperation and brotherhood between the English and Irish people. By doing so he also expressed his deepest convictions about comradeship, the mystic unity of life, the possibilities of cooperation, and the unity of art in life.

Finally, as a coda to this argument, it should be remarked that the punctuating musical gesture of the *Fantasia*, a duet between tuba and piccolo, illustrates that instruments on both ends of the acoustical spectrum can work together. If this is so, could not, or should not, opposite ends of the political spectrum find means of concord?

NOTES

- ¹ From Morris's first public lecture, 'The Lesser Arts', which was included in William Morris's, *News From Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Asa Briggs, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1986), p. 104.
- ² I would like to thank Professor Nanette Pyne, whose expertise on Morris studies informed every aspect of this essay. Professor Kathleen Pyne also made many helpful comments on earlier versions of the text.
- ³ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 2nd. edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987), p. 135.
- ⁴ For example, Annie Besant is one who was active in the socialist movement in England, and worked with Morris to promote a radical and socialist change in society. She later devoted herself to Theosophy, a spiritual discipline derived from Hindu concepts, and one with which Holst was familiar since his mother had read from its texts to him as a child.
- ⁵ Imogen Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst*, 3rd. edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), p. 27.
- ⁶ Michael Short, *Holst, The Man and his Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990), p. 93.
- ⁷ Also titled simply 'Irishwoman' in O'Neill's *Collection of Irish Folksong*.
- ⁸ *Holst*, op. cit., p. 27.
- ⁹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, passim.
- ¹⁰ Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst (eds.), *Heirs and Rebels by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst*, (London: Cooper Square Publishers 1974), p. 45.
- ¹¹ *National Music*, op. cit., pp. 71-72.
- ¹² This summary is derived from *History of Ireland, 1798-1924*, vol. II, by James O'Connor and George Doran, and *Ireland and Anglo-American Relations 1899-1921*, by Alan J. Ward, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1969).