Gustav Holst, William Morris and the Socialist Movement

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Recently, two articles have appeared on the subject of William Morris and music. Lesley Baker has argued convincingly that Morris did enjoy music deeply both as a performer (of plainsong) and as listener. In my own article 'Morris and Early Music; the Shaw/Dolmetsch connection' I drew attention to Morris's influence on the study and performance of early music via Arnold Dolmetsch and George Bernard Shaw. I also suggested that Morris's attitude to music was consistent with his attitude to his own society and its cultural productions in comparison with the past, and that he found in earlier music properly performed a satisfaction which he had not derived from most Victorian compositions or music making. Morris's influence on the young Gustav Holst should be seen in this context as it indicates an influence on contemporary music making and not simply on the rediscovery of the music of the past.

Morris's attitude to music was consistent with his general views of the relationship between the arts and society. Morris believed that the future prospects for art under capitalism were grim: "... and most deeply am I convinced that popular Art cannot live if labour is to be for ever the thrall of muddle, dishonesty, and disunion. Cheerfully I admit that I see signs about us of a coming time of order, goodwill, and union, and it is that which has given me the courage to say to you these few last words ...". This led him to be ambivalent about the value of pursuing the arts under capitalism, an ambivalence he was prepared to extend to his own artistic activity. In spite of his doubts, however, Morris gave help and encouragement to other artists whose efforts he valued, not only at an individual level but through his involvement with the Art Workers Guild and its activities, including the Arts and Craft Exhibitions. We should not be too surprised therefore at a young composer such as Holst gaining from his admiration for Morris both inspiration and encouragement to write music. As I shall attempt to show, Holst's early acquaintance with Morris and the Hammersmith Socialist Society had a strong and lasting impact on his life and work.

In her new and excellent biography of Morris, Fiona MacCarthy briefly mentions Holst as a member of the Hammersmith Socialist Society and includes a reference to the story that he could be seen around Hammersmith "on the official socialist cart playing a harmonium." Such a reference is welcome as Holst's association with Morris and the socialist movement has not by and large attracted the attention of Morris scholars. Students of Holst and his music have long been aware of the connection however, largely through the biographical writings of Holst's daughter Imogen Holst. Because of her direct link with the composer and in the context of relatively sparse biographical sources for Gustav Holst, these accounts can claim considerable authority. Ms. Holst's information on, and interpretation of, her father's early socialist connections are summed up in the first of her two biographies of Holst: "He began to hear about Socialism, and after reading several books by William Morris
he joined the Hammersmith Socialist Club and listened to Bernard Shaw's lectures at Kelmscott House. Here he found a new sort of comradeship, and here he became aware of other ways of searching for beauty. ... His socialism was never very active, and although he admired William Morris as a man, he found that the glamour of his romantic Medievalism soon wore off. But he remained in the club for the sake of good companionship, and in 1897 he accepted an invitation to conduct the Socialist Choir. He gave them Morley and Purcell to sing, as well as the inevitable choruses of Wagner." Ms. Hoist also recounts that Holst met his future wife through the choir: "One day a new soprano came to the choir practice: a Miss Isobel Harrison." Brief mention is also made of the dedication by Holst to Morris of the slow movement in his early "Cotswold Symphony" (1900). In spite of some vagaries this account contains some useful material, but it leaves a distinct impression that Holst's early contact with Morris and with socialism was something of a youthful fling, soon tired of along with his enthusiasm for Morris's "romantic Medievalism". Any commitment that Emily Harrison (known as Isobel) Holst's future wife may have had to socialism is ignored – she is simply a "new soprano" whom Holst met through the choir.

Imogen Holst's biography has recently been supplemented by that of Michael Short. Short draws heavily on Imogen Holst as a source but makes use of research of his own, particularly on Holst's later years. His account of Holst's early socialism is as brief as Imogen Host's and if anything more dismissive. He sums up his account thus: "accordingly, the young Holst concentrated on his musical work (with the socialist choir), leaving politics to the more militant members of the Hammersmith Socialist Society." Short also cites Holst's apparent political inactivity during the suffragette campaign ("I'm afraid I only give them my moral support") and in the General Strike as evidence that his early experience of Morris and of socialism had little lasting influence on his life.

It would certainly be wide of the mark to describe the later Holst as a political activist in the direct sense of campaigning for a party on political issues in the public domain. I believe that it is, nevertheless, possible to show that the commitment of Holst and of his wife to socialism in Hammersmith was more serious than has been recognised, that Holst remained a socialist and supporter of Morris and that his beliefs significantly influenced the course of his later life and his work as a composer.

Holst left his native Cheltenham in 1893 and travelled to London to study at the Royal College of Music. He was then not quite twenty years old. According to Imogen Holst his joining the Hammersmith Socialist Society followed his reading "several books by William Morris". Richard Capell, a friend of Holst, states that this was in 1895. Although there is no direct evidence to fix the date, 1895 would seem to be plausible in that Holst is said to have actually listened to Morris and this would therefore indicate a date prior to March 1896 when Morris made his last appearance at an H.S.S. meeting. This would accord with Imogen Holst's assertion that Holst listened to Bernard Shaw lecturing at Kelmscott House on more than one occasion; according to the H.S.S. Lecture list Shaw lectured at Kelmscott House in 1895. He lectured again on the 12th July 1896 on "What will Socialism be like?" Perhaps Holst was initially attracted by the opportunity to hear an array of impressive socialist speakers and began by attending the Sunday evening meetings of the society which involved a speech followed by discussion. The minutes of the Friday business meetings of the H.S.S. are missing for the period June 1893 to the beginning of March 1896,
thereafter they are complete until the last meeting in the book: Friday December 11th 1896. Gustav Holst is first recorded as attending a business meeting on 12th June. His attendance then becomes quite frequent; on 10th July it is recorded that “Von Holst moved adjournment of discussion on Referendum”. He was present again on 2nd October and at the meeting on 30th where it was proposed and carried that “the choir have leave to borrow the blackboard.” On November 6th he reported on the meeting the previous Sunday which had had no speaker but which Holst had presumably attended. He took and signed the minutes on 13th November and was also present at the special general meeting held the same night to discuss the future of the society following Morris’s death and the consequent need to quit Kelmscott House as a meeting place. The next week Holst took the chair at a sparsely attended branch meeting and he turned out again the following week for a meeting attended by only seven members. Two weeks later on 11th December Holst was present at the final meeting of the H.S.S. recorded in the minute book. If Fiona McCarthy’s reference to Holst playing the harmonium on “the official socialist cart” is added to the above record, it would seem to indicate that Holst’s commitment, far from waning after initial interest, actually broadened and deepened over a period of up to two years. In particular it appears that he decided to begin attending the less glamorous business meetings during 1896 and subsequently took a full part; moving a motion, acting as chair and taking the minutes. These are the actions of an established and trusted member.

The year 1897 is given by Imogen Holst as the date when Holst was asked to conduct the socialist choir. In the light of his clear commitment to the socialist movement through 1896 it would seem likely that his involvement with the musical activity of the society did not stem from a lack of political commitment; rather it was an opportunity to serve the movement in a way which utilised his musical talents and interest. In this connection it should be remembered that though the H.S.S. continued in a shadowy form after 1896 (there is reference to a Hammersmith Socialist Club on the back of an 1898 concert programme of the choir)

The involvement of Isobel Harrison with the H.S.S. also repays examination. The accepted view as set out by Imogen Holst is that Isobel was simply a “new soprano” in the Socialist Choir which Holst was then conducting – i.e. in 1897.

Short simply reports that he met Isobel in the choir. The minute book of the H.S.S. tells a rather different story however. On the 24th April 1896 Mrs. Watt proposed and W.H. Grant seconded that Miss Emily Isobel Harrison be posted for election to the Hammersmith Socialist Society. The following week she was also elected as a delegate to the Free Maintenance Committee, a position she held until that organisation apparently ceased to function. At this time another member of her family H. Harrison, probably her father or brother, was already an active member, suggesting that her family may well have been socialist in attitude. From May 1896 until the minutes cease in December Isobel attended most of the business meetings of the Society, sometimes when Gustav was also present. On one occasion in October she took the Chair (H.S.S. Minutes). It would appear therefore, that Holst did not simply marry a singer in the choir. He married a young woman who was already an active socialist
in her own right and who may well have had a socialist family background. Isobel and Gustav seem to have first met not in the Choir in 1897 but at least a year before and quite probably at a business meeting of the H.S.S.

Imogen Holst’s assertion that Holst’s activity as conductor of the Socialist Choir began in 1897 seems plausible17. In early 1897 the Hammersmith Socialist Choir announced a “Glee Concert and Dramatic Entertainment” to be held on 26th March in Shepherds Bush18. In part one of the programme was Morris’s ‘No Master’ followed by a varied collection of vocal pieces including works by Thomas Morley, Purcell, Mozart and Wagner. In addition Holst’s own part song ‘Clear and Cool’ was given its first public performance. Holst himself is billed as conductor. Part two of the evening featured an “original comedy” entitled ‘The Anarchist’ by Holst’s friend Fritz Hart. In it Holst played a philanthropist, Benjamin Beechcroft, and Isobel played Bunny, a lodginghouse keeper’s daughter. The evening was to finish with a rendering of the Marseillaise; a favourite way of evoking audience participation at Socialist gatherings of the time. One is strongly reminded of the similar musical and dramatic mixed evening at which Morris’s play Nupkins Awakened received its first performance over ten years before.

The next event for which details survive is a “Grand Evening Concert” on February 5th 1898 – again with Holst conducting but this time with the choir assisted by “professional artists”, suggesting that a substantial audience was anticipated19. This time the programme comprises a mixture of instrumental and vocal pieces including Dvorak’s Bagatelles (part 1), a Bach trio and music by Sullivan. Again there is a work by Holst; a song entitled ‘Two Brown Eyes’. Apparently a further concert and performance of ‘The Anarchist’ was to be held the following week; clearly the choir was active. Both these latter events were held under the auspices of the Hammersmith Socialist Club whose object “is to draw together Socialists of all shades of opinion, for the purposes of mutual intercourse, and, where possible, concerted action.” The fact that the clubs aims are printed on the concert flyer which itself boasts that it has been printed by “J. Riches Trade Union Printer, 49 Valling Road Hammersmith W.” suggests that music and politics were still well integrated.

There can be a tendency, when examining the early career of someone judged to be outstanding in a particular field, to map traces of their later brilliance onto their early efforts. In the case of Gustav Holst this might lead to an over-assessment of his musical achievements with the H.S.S. and perhaps to the misapprehension that politics was a mere prelude to Holst’s true vocation. The latter tendency has already been shown to be less than accurate; it would also be wrong to see Holst’s work with the choir as being particularly innovative. In content, his programmes were fairly typical of the musical pot pourri produced by the Socialist League and H.S.S. over the previous fifteen years and indeed, by other amateur bodies. There is perhaps a slight bias towards earlier English song (Morley, Purcell) but even this is by no means unique in this period. The fact of the H.S.S. possessing an active choir was in no way only due to Holst though he clearly carried on the tradition with enthusiasm. There had, in fact, been a choir attached to the H.S.S. since its inception. In February 1891 a request from the S.D.F. for piano scores of the socialist songs was referred to May Morris – at that time its conductor (H.S.S. Minutes). The choir sang at open air meetings at Uxbridge and Bridgend during 1891 and later, under Munday, elected choirmaster in 1892. It appears that in 1896 the Choir had A. Mordhurst as secretary;
in May he was asked to deal with a request from David Nichol that the choir perform at a meeting supporting the release of the Walsall Anarchists. Even before its split from the Socialist League, the importance of music is attested to by the attractive invitation cards for various entertainments which are to be found amongst the Emery Walker papers. The Socialist League itself had an active musical life. A choir was formed in September 1885 which had an intermittent existence until at least 1888. Music was featured strongly at League entertainments such as that advertised in June 1885 at which the performers were to include Eleanor Marx and David Nichol. The League also gave concerts at its headquarters in Farringdon Road which were reported on from time to time in Commonweal. It also appears to have been common practice to begin or end large political meetings with a solo performance by a competent comrade such as W. Blundell as well as by mass singing. Music did not just play a role as entertainment, in the early socialist movement; it provided the opportunity for an exercise in comradeship in performance and could be directly inspirational. The ‘Death Song’ composed by Morris for Alfred Linnell’s funeral is an excellent example of the latter role. Holst’s musical activities should be seen as continuing an important and valued tradition within the socialist movement of his time. Far from representing an escape from politics into a more congenial sphere, his work with the choir would have enabled him to use his skills to make a significant political contribution.

The biographies of Imogen Holst and Michael Short do not suggest that there was any lasting influence on Holst’s life or work arising from his contact with Morris and the H.S.S. As has been indicated above, Short points out that Holst was not apparently active in the suffragette campaign or in the General Strike as evidence of his lack of political interests in later life. Short quotes a passage from a 1926 letter by Holst to Ralph Vaughan Williams in support of this contention: “For I find that I am a hopeless half hogger and am prepared to sit on the fence as long as possible, partly through laziness and through force of habit, but chiefly through discovering that if I am a fool in music I am the damnedest of fools in everything else.” Short reads this as lack of concern; it could however just as easily be read as lack of confidence, particularly as later in the same letter Holst adds: “Of course in an emergency one has to throw all this overboard but I fear I only do so at the last moment. And if I don’t – if I try and think things out carefully and calmly – I am always wrong. This has happened so often that I am convinced that Dharma is the only thing for me. And I don’t think that I and such as I should be allowed to vote.”

However one chooses to interpret passages such as those above, Holst’s correspondence gives little indication of his extra-musical interests though there is an occasional interesting aside, such as in a letter of 1933 to Isobel from a nursing home: “Life is not too bad, I feel as if I were in a well run and rather aristocratic hotel. And I spent Xmas day reading Jane Austen and Trotsky.” He also wrote to Imogen in the same year “I wanted to read the minor prophets (in a borrowed bible) but there was too much Hitler in them for my taste.”

More informative is an article of 1920 by Holst’s close friend Vaughan Williams, who sums up the links between Holst’s past and his present:

The tawdriness of London, its unfriendliness, the sordidness both of the riches and poverty were overwhelming to an enthusiastic and sensitive youth; and 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; to Morris and his followers 'comradeship' was no pose, but an absolute necessity of life. And though as years go on Holst has grown out of the weak points in Morris's teaching, yet his ideal of thoroughness, of beauty, and above all of comradeship have remained and grown stronger. 29

Of his later life and work Vaughan Williams wrote:

The modernity of Holst is the result of the simple fact that he is a modern Englishman and that his music is in direct relation with real life ... but Holst has pursued the calling of a hard working, revered and inspiring teacher, he has been a good citizen, a firm friend, a reliable helper in time of trouble. ... Life and art are to Holst not enemies but complements of each other and as time goes on and his life gets busier and more varied, his artistic production becomes larger and firmer, his style more mature, pronounced and individual. 30

The importance of comradeship, the need to oppose "tawdriness", the links between art and life; all are themes which would have been recognised by Morris and by his circle.

Significant as testimonials from close friends may be, it is in Holst's life itself that the influence of his early contacts and beliefs can be traced. Holst was certainly a committed teacher, holding a post at St. Paul's girls school in Hammersmith for many years. In addition however, he also taught at Morley College from 1907 to 1924 where his pupils were mainly working class. Holst taught them to perform to the highest standards; their programmes included the first performance of Purcell's Fairy Queen since the seventeenth century and the three part mass by William Byrd. Holst encouraged his Morley college students to work with him on his festivals at Thaxted (see below) where he drew broadly on the talents of the population of a small rural community. His lifelong commitment to amateur music making would surely have been appreciated by Morris with his strong belief in the potential for creativity of all people.

One of the most significant phases in the life of Holst was his period in Thaxted, Essex which led to his friendship and collaboration with the Christian Socialist Vicar of Thaxted, Conrad Noel. An aristocrat by birth, Noel had come to socialism soon after leaving university, joining the Social Democratic Federation in the 1890s and reading Commonweal, though in its later post-Morris days. An extreme high Anglican, Noel combined, following his ordination, a Christianity drawing heavily for its ritual on the Middle Ages, with a militant socialism much influenced by William Morris. Noel's biographer Reg Groves sums up his beliefs thus:

[Noel] emphasised always that there was much more to making a new society than the acquisition of political power and the transfer of some property from the rich to the state, from one set of rulers to another. In this as in so many things, he was at one with the wisest of English socialists, William Morris, and much of what Morris said in prose and poetry and in the work of his hand, Noel tried to say in the group life he had developed at Thaxted. 32
Noel’s attitude to the middle ages is particularly reminiscent of Morris and Ruskin:

He himself had drawn much inspiration from the Middle Ages only because he felt that this period, despite many oppressions, had a certain vigour and freedom which expressed itself in communal life; and he borrowed much from the ancient English uses and ceremonials for the worship at Thaxted. But he adapted the ideas and usages to contemporary needs, and he formulated his rediscovery to make of it an outward expression of the newly aroused modern movement for social justice.33

Interestingly, Noel was given the living of Thaxted in 1910 by Frances Countess of Warwick, herself a socialist who wrote a short biography of William Morris. The ‘Thaxted Movement’ as it became known, went well beyond political activity in the narrow sense and embraced what would now be termed the idea of a ‘counter culture’. Noel and his wife consciously drew on folk traditions in dance and music in order to create a culture which was independent of the mass commercial productions and milieu of their day. The revival of folk and morris dancing, and the introduction of musical events drawing in large numbers of Thaxted’s people led to the involvement of a number of committed individuals from music and the arts including Cecil Sharpe and Gustav Holst.

Holst moved to Thaxted in 1913 and almost immediately made friends with Noel. From then until he left Thaxted in 1925 he was, as Noel put it, “master of the music.”34 His first job was to train the choir for the church. Its members were drawn from the local population and they achieved high standards with Holst. One member, Lily Harvey from the local sweet factory, was sent to London for professional training because of her exceptional vocal talents.35 In addition to his activities with the choir and playing the organ, Holst organised three major music festivals in Thaxted between 1916 and 1918. Here, local singers were supplemented by additions from Morley College and St. Paul’s school. The festivals lasted for days, with the main 1916 programme including works by Purcell, Victoria Lassus and Palestrina with the addition of much impromptu music making and dance sessions. Holst summed up the 1916 festival to Vaughan William: “There were about 15 Morleyites and 10 St. Paul’s girls, 10 outsiders and 10 Thaxted singers. The latter did grandly. Most of them work in a factory here and I have been asked to give them quicker music next year. It seems that they sang all day every day at their work for several months and the slow notes of the Bach chorales seriously affected their output.”36 Today the content of the events might be criticised as high culture rather than popular culture emanating from the community yet the enthusiasm of the participants was undeniable; as Holst put it: “I realise now why the bible insists on heaven being a place where people sing and go on singing.”37 Thaxted proved stimulating to Holst the composer too. He wrote a considerable amount of music in the town, including what he considered to be his best part song ‘Tomorrow shall be my dancing day’ and most famously his suite ‘The Planets’.

Holst left Thaxted in 1925 but kept up his contacts with the town and in particular his friendship with Noel. Noel was not an easy man to stay friends with over a long period; he was irascible and liable to alienate those whom he considered to be wavering in their socialist commitment including visiting members of Holst’s choir. Holst never seems to have been affected by Noel’s personality and maintained their close relationship. At Christmas 1930, for instance, Holst stayed with Noel who witnessed
the commissioning contract for ‘Hammersmith’ on Boxing Day. Fiona MacCarthy suggests that ‘Hammersmith’ was an affectionate tribute to Holst’s early socialist days in London.

It is necessary to exercise extreme caution in ascribing specific influence on Holst as a composer to Morris and the Socialist movement. Music is notoriously difficult to analyse in this way; the days when one could speak confidently of a ‘socialist style’ are long gone. Just as unsusceptible of a useful answer is the question of what music influenced by William Morris would be like. There is some evidence that Holst drew musical inspiration from Morris however. He set at least five Morris poems as songs between 1897 and 1917, including ‘Autumn Song’ and ‘Masters in this hall’.

As has already been mentioned, the slow movement of the early Cotswold Symphony is an elegy to William Morris. While evidence of direct socialist inspiration on music by Holst is absent (apart perhaps for ‘Hammersmith’), it is perhaps possible to point to the absence of the secure and the complacent, and to contrast this with the work of a contemporary such as Elgar, particularly in the latter’s immediate pre-war and wartime period. There is undoubtedly something striking about the horrifying and brazen evocation of war in ‘Mars’, the first movement of ‘The Planets’. Composed in 1914 it marks Holst as a person with a prophetic vision of the true nature of modern conflict. What is certain is that Holst was one of the foremost British composers of the twentieth century and that music was his primary means of self-expression.

A detailed study of the music of Holst is beyond the scope of this article. It has been shown, however, that he was influenced in the way he lived his life by both Morris and by his continuing socialist commitment. The life experience of a composer cannot but inform his work, however complex the process. Holst himself expressed his own sense of the influence of beliefs and ideals on human society and it is appropriate that he should have the last word: “I believe most thoroughly in comradeship in all shapes as being the ideal world ... I am Hindu enough to believe that comradeship becomes transmuted into Unity, only this is a matter that lies beyond all words.”

NOTES
6 Ibid. p.17.
8 Ibid., p.30.
9 Imogen Holst, Gustav Holst, p.16.
14 Holst Birthplace Museum, Cheltenham.
15 Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst*, p.17
18 Concert programme 1897, Holst Birthplace Museum, Cheltenham.
19 Concert Programme 1898, Holst Birthplace Museum, Cheltenham. Information in the rest of the paragraph is taken from this Programme.
20 Emery Walker Collection, Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery, Cheltenham.
21 *Commonweal*, September 1885, p.80.
22 Draft ticket in Emery Walker Collection, Cheltenham.
23 E.g. *Commonweal*, 7th August 1886, p.151.
24 *Commonweal*, 25th September 1886, p.207.
26 BL. Add. Mss 57953.
28 Ibid. p.164.
30 ibid.
33 Ibid. p.68.
35 Ibid. p.100.
37 Quoted in Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst and Thaxted* (pamphlet, date and publisher unknown).