CHAN **241-6**

CHANDOS 2 FOR 1

HOLST

includes

The Cloud Messenger · A Choral Fantasia · Part-songs

Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

COMPACT DISC ONE

	The Cloud Messenger, H111*	43:11
1	'O thou, who com'st from heaven's king' –	8:15
2	'Tarry not, O Cloud, tarry not. Rushing northward…' –	6:52
3	'Tarry not, O Cloud, tarry not.' –	4:48
4	'Tarry not, O Cloud. Bow thy head' –	10:45
5	'When the dancers are weary…'	12:31
	The Hymn of Jesus, H140	22:24
6	Prelude –	5:44
7	The Hymn	16:40

Della Jones mezzo-soprano*
London Symphony Chorus
London Symphony Orchestra
Richard Hickox

8	**Ave Maria, H49**	3:48
9	**The Evening-watch, H159**	4:37

Susanna Spicer alto solo · **Mark Milhofer** tenor solo

The Finzi Singers
Paul Spicer director

TT 74:22

COMPACT DISC TWO

		Seven Part-songs, H162†‡	23:05
1	1	Say who is this?	2:34
2	2	O Love, I complain	1:32
3	3	Angel spirits of sleep	1:59
4	4	When first we met	2:03
5	5	Sorrow and joy	1:25
6	6	Love on my heart from Heaven fell	2:29
7	7	Assemble, all ye maidens	10:51
8		**A Choral Fantasia, H177†‡**	16:42
9		**A Dirge for Two Veterans, H121‡**	6:31
10		**Ode to Death, H144§**	12:27

Patricia Rozario soprano†
Joyful Company of Singers‡
London Symphony Chorus§
Stephen Westrop chorus master
City of London Sinfonia
Richard Hickox

11	**This have I done for my true love, H128**	5:48

Rachel Wheatley soprano solo

		Four Part-songs	7:36
12	1	O lady, leave that silken thread	2:46
13	2	Soft and gently	1:09
14	3	The autumn is old	1:56
15	4	Winter and the birds	1:37

The Finzi Singers
Paul Spicer director

TT 72:44

Holst: The Cloud Messenger etc.

Gustav Holst was born in Cheltenham in 1874 of a musical family who, two generations before, had come from the Baltic port of Riga. Indeed, Holst's great-grandfather had been a musician at the Russian court. Holst took many years finding his mature style, and although his later references to 'early horrors' have proved, with the benefit of distance and performances, to have been misplaced, the fingerprints of his mature manner only gradually appeared in his music. It was not until his orchestral suite *The Planets* became popular after the First World War that he could feel that he was a success, though, doubtless, he would have pooh-poohed the importance of that kind of success.

The Cloud Messenger

> I found myself in thought transported quite easily and without volition to a region of remoteness. I experienced a sensation akin to that which overwhelms one in mountains or on high plateau country… not a sense of grandeur or size as of extreme distance from the centre of things, as though the air one breathed were noticeably rarefied…

Arthur Bliss's reaction to the first music of Holst's he ever heard – *The Cloud Messenger* – is significant. It suggests that the 'message' – in terms of Holst's own personality, his individuality as reflected in his music – was indeed safely delivered, and by a work which has suffered more from neglect than any of Holst's other large-scale choral compositions. We can probably blame a disastrous first performance, that of 4 March 1913, in London's old Queen's Hall, Holst himself conducting. Exactly what went wrong is not recorded, but Holst had set great store by the piece and its failure was a hard blow. Stainer and Bell printed a vocal score but Holst thereafter took little interest in it, nor did Imogen Holst (who is quite critical of it in her study of Holst's music) ever encourage performance or recording.

Listeners must decide for themselves whether this blacklisting is justified. In my view it is not. There are some uncomfortable moments in *The Cloud Messenger* and some undistinguished music; but the good, surely, outweighs the not-so-good. One tends to

agree with Vaughan Williams who wrote to Holst:

> …most of it is beautiful and there are only one or two places I don't care for which I shall not bother you with as they are merely matters of opinion.

Much is not merely beautiful but also *original* and strikingly prophetic of Holst's later mature manner. The first great *fortissimo* outburst of the choir – the invocation to the Cloud – tells us this is to be music of great choral (and chordal) power and glory, like the *Hymn of Jesus*. The cold woodwinds and solo viola which accompany the contralto foreshadow the austerity of *Egdon Heath*, while the long processional, the journey to the Himalaya (*maestoso* trombones, treading ostinato bass, male voices raised in solemn chant) could be the work of no other composer. As we approach the snow-line – the 'peaks of Kailasa' – Holst turns the same few melodic fragments round and round, over and over, each attracting lovely new counterpoints and colours, just like a contemporary minimalist composer; in terms of symphonic sonority the bar in this section scored for harp and glockenspiel alone is unique for its time and throws into effective relief the neo-Wagnerian grandeur or gigantism of the dance-climax, whose stylized orientalism looks forward more to the Roussel of *Padmavâti* and the Szymanowski of *King Roger* than back to Rimsky-Korsakov. An awe-inspiring passage follows: note the dramatic entry of the full organ, which sweeps everything away just as it does later in *The Planets* ('Uranus'); and the massive girder-like pedal point on the low C which persists (stated or implied) for no fewer than eighty bars right up to the entry of the semi-chorus, the bringers of the message. In the final page the messenger describes himself as the would-be 'bringer of comfort': but to all who know 'Venus' in *The Planets*, the music, with its swaying chords and slow dissolving into space, is the 'bringer of peace'.

The Planets (1914–16) followed straight upon the first performance of *The Cloud Messenger* which, though definitively composed between 1910 and 1912, probably originated as far back as 1903, the year of Holst's belated honeymoon. Holst first came across Kalidasa's Sanskrit poem in the 1890s in R.W. Frazer's *Silent Gods and Sun-steeped Lands*, the book which introduced him to the Sanskrit literature; Holst's own adaptation–translation of the text is based on Frazer's version.

Kalidasa – described by Frazer as 'the acknowledged Shakespeare of the Indian drama' flourished probably in the first century BC. His story is of a poet who prevails on a cloud moving in the direction of the Himalayas to take a message of love to his wife, from whom he is separated. The cloud passes over the Ganges (the 'Holy Mother Ganga') by the holy temple at Kailasa where the presiding deity is he who 'holds the three worlds in his grasp' – i.e. Shiva, the Great God, the Lord of the Dance.

The Hymn of Jesus

The Dance. 'Divine Grace is dancing: ye who dance not, know not what we are knowing…'

The dance-element in *Cloud Messenger*, though prominent, is still incidental; in *The Hymn of Jesus* – probably Holst's masterpiece – it acquires enormous religio-mystical import as the symbol of ecstasy, and becomes the focal point. 'The Heav'nly Spheres make music for us… all things join in the dance'. In the 1920s men thrilled to that as they had no other 'religious' music since *Gerontius*. We who have grown up with Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* can scarcely appreciate this kind of conceptual originality. Dancing – in Church? But even Tovey – normally so sober and factual and rational, however intrinsically *musical* his analyses – had to write: 'the words seemed to shine in the light and depth of a vast atmosphere created by the music'. But that 'vast atmosphere' comprises the same tensions, conflicts, ambivalences as in *The Cloud Messenger*, though heightened here to the *n*th degree, since *The Hymn of Jesus* is basic Holst, which *The Cloud Messenger* was not. Holst's personality was riven by these conflicts, or rather by the one conflict, for they are all variations on the same theme: fire/ice, flesh/spirit, sensuality/austerity, Wagner/?. That ? is the key to Holst's originality. The Wagner of *Parsifal* was an influence he perhaps never completely outgrew: it was too pervasive, too essentially a part of him. It is far less prominent in *The Hymn of Jesus* than in *The Cloud Messenger*, but listen carefully for the Amfortas-like pain-chord at: 'Fain would I be pierced'.

In this case that ? represents those non-Western elements derived from Russia, from the East, from the timeless continuity of Christian liturgical tradition. What an odd assortment it is: the solo trombone from *La grande pâque russe* and Rimsky-Korsakov's dissolving wind-chords; medieval plainsong ('Vexilla Regis' and 'Pange lingua'); and, most

fascinatingly of all, sonorities and sound-patterns which come from even further afield and have nothing whatsoever to do with the English cathedral traditionalism. The combination of pentatonic or five-note chordal configurations, and the bell-like sounds of piano and celesta – clear, cold, crystalline – suggest something much more exotic, Eastern, even pre-Messiaenic (*Couleurs de la cité céleste*?). The long scalic ostinato figures in the 'Hymn' evoke the pealing of huge bells, muffled and muddied as one might hear them deep inside a large church or cathedral. Then there are intimations of modern aleatoric techniques: the semi-chorus chant the 'Vexilla Regis' to the accompaniment of the bi-chordal sway from 'Venus' (*The Planets*; cf. the end of *The Cloud Messenger*) but with the difference that the chords proceed with their swaying completely oblivious of the chanting of the choir in the distance. Later in the 'Hymn' itself Holst, wanting to evoke the hushed asynchronous chanting of a vast multitude, gives the voices not rhythmic *song* but rhythmic *speech*: breathed words, pitchless vowels, clear consonants and tremendous contained energy. Later we meet a remarkable secularising of the sacred: the 'Vexilla Regis' turned into a pagan dance or march with wordless voice and primitive pitchless drumming (tabor) – 'pagan', except that this is, we realize, a depiction of the 'passion of man' Christ has gone to endure. No wonder that Imogen Holst was moved to write of her father that he was

> utterly free from routine piety, his memories of the B-minor Mass were of ecstasy, his Sanskrit studies had taught him to think beyond the boundaries of Europe, and his idea of Christ included the terrifying unexpectedness of the Byzantine mosaics.

The Hymn of Jesus, written in 1917, was first performed in 1920 and was an immediate and overwhelming success. Holst chose – and himself newly translated – his texts from the Apocryphal Acts of St John, and it may help the listener to have the portion placed in context.

> Now before he was taken by the lawless Jews… he gathered all of us together and said: Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing a hymn to the Father, and go forth to that which lieth before us. He bade us therefore make as it were a ring, holding one another's hand, and himself standing in the midst, he said: Answer Amen to me.

What Holst sets as *The Hymn of Jesus* follows; and after the end of the music the story concludes.

> Thus, my beloved, having danced with us the Lord went forth. And we as men gone astray or dazed with sleep fled this way and that.

© Christopher Palmer

Ave Maria

By the year 1900 Holst still had years to go before he would even begin to achieve consistent performances, but the *Ave Maria* gives us one of his first published works, performed in May 1901, and often heard subsequently. It was dedicated to the memory of his mother, who had died eighteen years previously. The setting in eight parts for women's voices gives the effect of a double chorus.

The Evening-watch

Holst's setting of *The Evening-watch*, to words by Henry Vaughan, dates from 1924 and was found difficult on account of its harmonic austerity when it was first heard at the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester Cathedral in 1925. There followed a few performances and it was republished in 1965. Henry Vaughan's 'A Dialogue' comes from his *Silex Scintillans* of 1650, written as an exchange between the Body and the Soul. Holst's setting is in eight parts. The Body's opening 'Farewell! I go to sleep' taken by a solo tenor with the chorus answering as the Soul, immediately transports us to the stylistic world of Holst's recently completed *Choral Symphony* and the setting is largely chordal. The comparative coldness of the music is the result of it being built on the interval of the fourth. 'My soul has nought but fire and ice' were words Holst set in the second of his songs for voice and violin: he might have been writing of himself, and here the controlled ecstasy, thrilling at the final climax on 'and man's eternal Prime', gives a real feeling for the eternal. Holst intended this to be the first of two motets and he gave it the opus number Op. 43 No. 1.

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Seven Part-songs

The settings of seven poems by Robert Bridges were written in 1925 (Nos 6–7) and 1926 (Nos 1–5). Scored for solo soprano, three-part female voices (*divisi*) and strings, five of them were first heard in December 1926 when they were given by a choir directed by Holst's friend, Harold Brookes. The first complete performance was an informal occasion at Bridges' home at Boar's Hill, Oxford, in July 1927, when Holst directed forces from St Paul's Girls School.

After the performance the poet laureate wrote to the composer:

> You asked me once or twice about the music, whether I liked it: if I did not say much it was because I felt it impertinent in me to pretend to judge of your work, and I thought that the pleasure, which I could tell the professionals were feeling was a better compliment than mine would be… I did not understand any piece well on first hearing, but liked it at second hearing and came in the end to full pleasure. Your way of treating the words is so novel…

Each song demonstrates Holst's acute sensitivity to Bridges' texts, no less so than in the opening 'Say who is this?' where the melancholy of the voices' triads against the viola pedal at once captures the poem's mood. Holst's fondness for creating melodic material out of scalic figures is very much in evidence, as is his occasionally unnerving ability to place vocal lines against an extremely light-weight accompaniment. Perhaps most impressive of all is the final song, 'Assemble all ye maidens', an 'Elegy on a lady whom grief for the death of her betrothed killed', in which Holst explores the possibilities of the Phrygian mode, the intervals of the tritone and perfect fifth, and ostinato in a moving, complex piece.

A Choral Fantasia

Holst composed his *Choral Fantasia*, a setting of Bridges' *Ode to Music*, in 1930 in response to a request from Herbert Sumsion, organist of Gloucester Cathedral, who wanted a new choral work for the following year's Three Choirs Festival in which there would be a *concertante* organ part. The first performance of the work was given on 8 September 1931 at Gloucester Cathedral by Dorothy Silk (Holst's favourite soprano) and the Three Choirs Festival chorus and orchestra conducted by the composer. Holst wrote to his daughter, Imogen, the day after the premiere,

> I was too much 'wropt up' to know how the Fantasia went last night but RVW [Ralph Vaughan Williams] was obviously moved by it and other things don't matter so much.

Holst was undoubtedly taking consolation in Vaughan Williams's approbation, for the critics had been united in their dislike of the work, one had even remarked, with all the insular parochialism of English musical journalism of the era:

> when Holst begins his new *Choral Fantasia* on a six-four on G and a C sharp below that, with an air of take it or leave it, one is inclined to leave it.

In the light of such hostility, Vaughan Williams was moved to write to his friend and colleague,

> I played through the fantasia again yesterday & it is *most* beautiful – I know you don't care, but I just want to tell the press… that they are misbegotten abortions.

The reputation of the *Choral Fantasia* undoubtedly suffered because of the received opinion stemming from the critical dissaproval when the work was new and it was not until the 1960s that its strengths began to receive wider recognition, principally because of Imogen Holst's passionate advocacy of her father's music through her writings and gramophone recordings. While the audience in 1931 may have been perturbed by some of Holst's harmonic thinking, heard in the wider context of European music of the period it is clear that Holst's harmonic palette, in which he juxtaposes modal and bitonal techniques alongside more conventional writing, while not as adventurous as many of his European colleagues is experimental enough to warrant proper assessment rather than trite dismissal.

The *Choral Fantasia* begins with an organ prelude, *fortissimo*, whose opening bars adumbrate a typical Holstian scale in the Phrygian mode. A short cadenza leads to the chord that caused so much offence, which introduces the soprano soloist ('Man born of desire'). Holst's predilection in his late works for tritonal relationships can be heard in the trombone and trumpet fanfares that lead into the important timpani motif (in 5/4), redolent of the *Dirge for Two Veterans*. All this paves the way for the extensive fugato, beginning *molto pianissimo*, whose chromatically inflected strands suggest the mood of Holst's orchestral homage to Thomas Hardy, *Egdon Heath* (1927). The entry of the chorus at 'Rejoice, ye dead', in a flowing 7/4 metre, moves away from chromaticism to a diatonic accompaniment in the brass. A luminous passage in B major ('Now ye are starry names'), which quickly leads to a climax at 'With deathless flames', precedes a modified reprise of the opening organ prelude and the soprano solo (now sung by the male chorus). The homophonic five-part choral-writing at 'He seeth the sun' shows Holst creating dissonances by contrary chordal motion. The climactic two-part canon at 'Then he hideth his face', itself a modified reprise of earlier fugato, unveils some unexpected harmonic possibilities from the material which perhaps reveals the path Holst would have taken had he lived longer. The closing soprano solo ('Rejoice ye dead, where'er your spirits dwell') completes the frame.

A Dirge for Two Veterans
This work for male voices, brass and percussion was composed during the first months of 1914. Like the later *Ode to Death*, it is a Whitman setting from *Leaves of Grass* ('Drum-Taps'). Holst probably knew Vaughan Williams's setting of the same words from 1911 which ultimately found its way in to *Dona nobis pacem*, but Holst's version is full of his own stylistic fingerprints. It is perhaps most notable for the sense of the 'sad procession' which he evoked in a number of later works and in the trumpet fanfares whose violent undertones offer a premonition of 'Mars the Bringer of War' from *The Planets*.

Ode to Death
Holst's *Ode to Death* was composed in the summer of 1919. The motivation behind the setting of Walt Whitman's 'When lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' ('Memories of President Lincoln') from the *Leaves of Grass* was the futility and terrible waste of life in the First World War. Although there is no dedication on the printed vocal score or on the manuscript full score, Imogen Holst asserts that she saw the words 'For C.C. [Cecil Coles, a young composer] and the others' in Holst's handwriting at one stage. The first performance was given at Leeds Town Hall in October 1922 by the Leeds Festival Chorus and the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Albert Coates.

The tranquil setting of Whitman's opening words – 'Come lovely and soothing death, Undulate round the world, serenely arriving…' – is characterized by sustained pedal As around which Holst spins a serene sequence of perfect fifths and, in the fifth bar, the additional tension of a B flat chord as the chorus subdivides into eight parts, the mood of which recalls 'Saturn' from *The Planets* and parts of *Savitri*. The central *Allegro moderato*, beginning at 'Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet', is founded on a typical Holstian five-four ostinato figure. The closing *Adagio* ('The night in silence under many a star') recalls the pedal notes and the expressive chains of fifths (now on celesta).

This have I done for my true love
Thaxted in Essex is closely associated with Holst, and it was there he wrote this dancing setting of 'This have I done for my true love' in 1916. 'Divine grace is dancing' sing the choir in Holst's *Hymn of Jesus*, written soon after, and it is clear the composer was strongly drawn to the concept. In fact, the traditional Cornish poem had been found by his friend Conrad Noel, vicar of Thaxted, a champion of the revival of folk dancing and folk music in church services. Noel copied it out and pinned it on the church notice board, where Holst read it.

© Philip Reed

Four Part-songs
This collection contains some of Holst's earliest works, all written while he was a student of Stanford. 'Winter and the birds' dates from 1894, 'O lady, leave that silken thread' and 'The autumn is old' from 1895 and 'Soft and gently' from 1896. These are not works by which great reputations are made, but they do reveal a practical and sympathetic feeling for voices, and are clearly the music of an experienced choirmaster. The first and third set words by Thomas Hood (1799–1845), the second is a translation of Heine. But it is the earliest, 'Winter and the birds', that is of most interest because the words are by Holst's fellow student Fritz Hart. A friend at the Royal College of Music, he provided the words for several of Holst's student compositions, including his operetta *The Revoke*. Hart left for Australia in 1908 and his music, including his many operas, has remained unknown in the UK.

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The *Ave Maria*, *The Evening-watch*, *This I have done for my true love* and the Four Part-songs were recorded in association with DaRaBesc Ltd, Computer Systems Procurement Professionals.

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