

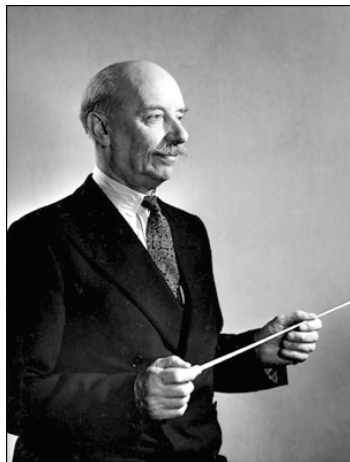
Sir Adrian Cedric Boult (April 8, 1889 – February 22, 1983)

Boult was born in Chester and educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. As a schoolboy, he was introduced to the world of music by a family friend, Frank Schuster, who was a friend of Edward Elgar and introduced the young Boult to the composer around 1905.

He completed his musical education at the Leipzig Conservatory where he learnt to conduct by watching the eminent Hungarian conductor Arthur Nikisch. He sang in choral festivals and at the Leeds Festival of 1913, where he went to watch Nikisch conduct, and made the acquaintance of George Butterworth and other British composers.

During World War I he was employed at the War Office, and whilst there in 1918

planned a series of concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra, which included several important recent British works: Gustav Holst's The Planets, of which he gave the first private performance, A London Symphony by Ralph Vaughan Williams, of which he gave the first performance of the revised version, and Elgar's Symphony No. 2 which had fallen into neglect. Elgar wrote to him and said he felt sure the future of his music was safe in Boult's hands. In this way Boult laid the foundations for a long career as a champion of twentieth century English music. As one example, Vaughan Williams dedicated Job, A Masque for Dancing to Boult in the mid-1930s, several years after the actual première of the work.



THE HYMN OF JESUS
THE PERFECT FOOL - EGDON HEATH
GUSTAV HOLST



Conducted by

Sir Adrian Boult



HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS

"A place perfectly accordant with man's nature -- neither ghastly, hateful nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning nor tame; but like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony." This quotation from Thomas Hardy's 1878 novel *The Return of the Native* appears on the score of Gustav Holst's tone poem *Egdon Heath*, which was written in 1927, dedicated to Hardy (who, at age 87, had one more year of life remaining), and long regarded by the composer as his finest work. It was commissioned by the New York Symphony Orchestra, which premiered it under the direction of Walter Damrosch at New York's Mecca Auditorium on February 12, 1928. The next day Holst led the City of Birmingham Symphony in the British premiere at Cheltenham, where the first major festival of Holst's music had taken place the previous year. Those initial performances went well, but another in London a few days later was greeted poorly by a noisy and unreceptive audience. This seems to have made Holst a bit anxious about the work, and may have led to his desire that the above Hardy quotation always appear in any explanatory program notes.

In her book on her father's music, Holst's daughter Imogen evokes the Hardy quotation in referring to the "mysterious monotony" of the tone poem, which begins with a somber melody heard first in the double basses, then taken up by the rest of the strings. A nostalgic theme in the brass and woodwinds, and a scurrying theme in the strings and oboe, work their way into the texture as well, leading to moody, twilight music and what has been described as a "strange, ghostly dance." This dark, evocative work finishes mysteriously, quietly, and somewhat inconclusively.

Gustav Holst had been thinking of an opera, *The Perfect Fool*, for some years prior to its presentation in 1922. The opera is a rarity, a large-scale parody opera. It spoofs the conventions of nineteenth century opera in a diffuse structure, including a number of purely spoken passages. Even the composer's daughter, Imogen Holst, has remarked (in her article on the composer in *Grove's Dictionary*) that the text by Holst himself is "inadequate." Still, it has

been observed that "there is a lot of good music locked up in this rather impossible framework."

The opera begins, oddly, with a 12-minute ballet, said to have been written to provide a sort of précis of the plot of the opera, which is rather difficult to comprehend without such help. The ballet music is written with a clarity and brilliance of instrumentation that will be instantly recognized by any listener familiar with *The Planets*. A brief opening andante featuring an invocation on trombones by a Wizard (surely a close relative of "Uranus, the Magician") opens three sparkling character dances of, respectively, "The Spirits of Earth," "The Spirits of Water," and "The Spirits of Air." The work has been a concert favorite in Britain for some time.

Gustav Holst's *The Hymn of Jesus* (written in August 1917) has always been one of his most widely performed works. Its first performance in London in 1920 was an outstanding success; Ralph Vaughan Williams, the dedicatee, said he just 'wanted to get up and embrace everyone and then get drunk'. Yet perhaps it is taken too much for granted. There remains the mystery why Holst chose to set an obscure Gnostic text in ancient Greek at a time of national catastrophe in the First World War. What was he offering his audience?

Undoubtedly, the work is Holst's artistic and philosophical response to the War; to suffering so intense, and on such a scale, that it was scarcely comprehensible. By 1916 hostilities had reached a pulverising stalemate and conscription had been introduced in Britain. Unlike his friend Vaughan Williams (who had enlisted in 1914) Holst had been denied participation because of his health. The final impetus for producing *The Hymn of Jesus* may well have been the Battle of the Somme. During five months of 1916, over two million people were slaughtered, including George Butterworth and others of Holst's friends. Despite a successful Whitsuntide musical gathering at Thaxted, his mood had become edgy and uncharacteristically explosive.^(Note.1) Yet far from being elegiac, *The Hymn of Jesus* – his first major work after completing *The Planets* – is a very positive and constructive response to suffering.

THE HYMN OF JESUS

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1. The Perfect Fool - Ballet Music, Op. 39
2. Egdon Heath - Op. 47
3. The Hymn Of Jesus Op. 37

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