



The Hymn Tunes of Elgar and Holst

Treasure No 49: The Hymn Tunes of Elgar and Holst by B. Massey: An article from Bulletin 160

Fate laid a heavy hand on English music in the year 1934. Within less than four months death claimed three major figures: Delius, Elgar and Holst. Delius had no impact on the world of hymnody—he would no doubt have been surprised if he had—but, fifty years on, the work of the other two in our field may be worth a brief examination.

In the case of Elgar the examination can be brief indeed. Although Grove's Dictionary notes among 'early works, unpublished' a hymn tune in the key of G dated 1878 and 'other anthems and hymn tunes', only one published tune is known. This too dates from 1878, when Elgar was 21, and is now known as 'DRAKE'S BROUGHTON', the name of a village a couple of miles NNW of Pershore in Elgar's native county of Worcestershire. Like all his other sacred vocal music at this time it was doubtless written for performance in St George's Roman Catholic Church, Worcester, where his father was organist and he himself was assistant. The first publication of the tune, then unnamed, is said to be in A.E. Tozer's *Catholic Hymns*, third edition, 1898, although there has been an unconfirmed report of an earlier sighting in *The Catholic Hymnal*, Dublin, 1896. It passed into the 1912 edition of *The Westminster Hymnal*, again unnamed. The 1939 edition of that book did supply a name but misprinted the Broughton as *Boughton* and this error passed into a number of other books. More recent hymnal editors, however, having had their attention drawn to the paths of righteousness by a letter in *The Musical Times*, have been more careful with their geography.

The tune well suits the children's hymn 'Hear thy children, gentle Jesus' (*WH* 177) for which it was written; even in RC books, however, it has been set to a variety of hymns. One can hardly point, in this unpretentious tune, to signs of greatness to come, and it would be easy to dismiss it as competent but ordinary. Yet, against the prevailing fashion of 1878, it shines with a purity and unaffected simplicity which may well owe something to Elgar's great interest at that time in the music of Mozart. The composer himself cannot have thought too badly of this tune for after more than fifty years he used it in the first movement (Aubade) of his *Nursery Suite* (1931)—and thereby won the approbation of Delius who described the movement as 'a gem'. Incidentally, organists looking for a prelude on 'DRAKE'S BROUGHTON' might well turn to Charles Woodhouse's piano reduction of the *Nursery Suite* (published by Keith Prowse); the Aubade transfers easily and effectively to the organ.

Elgar's direct contribution to hymnody, then, is slender. It was, however, no doubt inevitable that hands would be laid on the 'Gerontius theme', and in *The Cambridge Hymnal* we find Elizabeth Poston's adaptation of it as a straightforward SATB setting for 'Praise to the holiest'. Unfortunately the theme loses the spaciousness it had in the oratorio and one can hardly count the adaptation a success. In *Westminster Praise* (4) Erik Routley uses part of the theme as a descant for the Scottish psalm tune 'GLENLUCE', also as a setting of 'Praise to the holiestest', but again with questionable effectiveness.

So the hymn-singers Elgar is really 'DRAKE'S BROUGHTON' only, and its increasing use outside the RC communion is much to be welcomed.

Holst's contribution to hymnody is a good deal larger: nine original tunes and five arrangements or adaptations. As a student at the Royal College of Music Holst met Vaughan Williams, and in 1895 there began a close and enduring friendship between the two men. It became their practice to play over and discuss with each other their new compositions. Thus it was natural that, when V.W. was editing the music of the *English Hymnal*, Holst too became quite closely involved. In V.W.'s renowned preface to *EH* he expresses his special thanks to 'Mr Nicholas Gatty, Mus.Bac., and Mr G. von Holst, who have throughout been closely associated with him in the selection, arrangement, and correction of the musical portion of the book'. Hence it could be that, for example, some of the folk-song arrangements introduced in the book were in fact made by Holst. This of course we cannot now discover.

But the 1906 *EH* does contain three first-rate tunes which Holst composed specially for it. The best known tune is unquestionably 'CRANHAM' (25), the inevitable congregational setting of 'In the bleak mid-winter'. His daughter Imogen said of it: 'The critical mind may reject it as sentimental, but the carol singer finds it entirely satisfying'. We can certainly agree with the last part of that judgement since the tune has received the ultimate accolade of popular approbation, impromptu performance by the person in (literally) the street. In strict truth, what is almost invariably heard, even from choral societies, is not what Holst wrote. In the penultimate bar, Holst has slurs between the first and second and between third and fourth melody notes, but 'folk wisdom' decidedly prefers a slur covering the first three notes. Several hymn books, following the 1927 *CH*, have wisely yielded to *vox populi*: is it not time that all did so? Pedantry is pointless.

The daunting 14.14.14.15 metre of 'From glory to glory advancing' was matched with remarkable effect by 'SHEEN' (310). The long lines allow a gradual build-up to a striking climax and Holst seized the opportunity memorably. The tune's only significant competitor is C.S. Lang's 'ST KEVERNE' (*CP* 315) but that seems to call for more athleticism than most congregations can muster; Holst, I fancy, is the winner. His other tune for *EH*, 'BOSSINEY' (571), is tucked away in the 'Mission Services' section; being set to a now unwanted hymn in a unique metre it is virtually unknown. It is none the less a splendid tune: oh that all mission hymns were matched with music of this calibre!

Next in chronological order is a piece of pomp and circumstance (*SP* 325) written for a children's pageant in Stepney in 1909. Again Imogen Holst has an interesting comment: 'it narrowly escapes defeat in its hackneyed cadence'. Possibly; but the unique metre and the Edwardian jingoism of the words combine to sink the tune irretrievably.

The *Public School Hymn Book* of 1919 includes Holst's 'ESSEX' for 'Our blest Redeemer'. Whether it was written for the book is not clear; it may already have been in circulation in one of the schools where Holst taught. It was taken into *CH*, *BUB* and several school hymnals, but not into either edition of *SP* and thus escaped even Imogen's eagle eye as cataloguer of her father's works. A notable feature of the tune is the rise of the last phrase to the dominant (the kind of thing which C.S. Lang was fond of) but this very feature probably tells against it for a public devoted to Dykes.

At about the same time the now very popular arrangement of 'PERSONENT HODIE', alias 'THEODORIC', was made. It is the second of Three Carols for unison chorus and orchestra and is set to the words 'On this day earth shall ring'. After publication on a leaflet in 1924 the tune was taken into the first (1925) edition of *Songs of Praise* and the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928). Accompanists will have found that, even with careful accenting, the introductory downward scale tests a congregation's ability to count.

‘THAXTED’ for ‘I vow to thee, my country’—on which Canon James wrote in *Bulletin* 153—dates from about 1921. And then, in 1925, appeared the first edition of *Songs of Praise*. Holst’s association with this book seems to have been less close than that with *EH*; nevertheless he wrote (or arranged) four tunes especially for the book. Again he tackled unusual metres; again the hymn texts are mostly not those now in demand. ‘VALIANT HEARTS’ might still find a market if divorced from J.S. Arkwright’s unfortunate poem; ‘MONK STREET’, to Heywood’s medieval meditation ‘I sought thee round about’, is arguably Holst’s least successful tune—but let it be said in his defence that the task was all but impossible. ‘BROOKEND’ (named after the house in Dunmow, Essex, to which the Holsts had recently moved) is perhaps hardly congregational but it makes a delightful little choir piece with Herrick’s ‘In this world, the Isle of Dreams’. Its inclusion in *Broadcast Praise* may give it a new lease of life. ‘PRINCE RUPERT’ for ‘Onward Christian soldiers’ is said to be ‘from an old English march’, but Archibald Jacob in *Songs of Praise Discussed* says that the 17th-century ‘PRINCE RUPERT S MARCH’ serves only for the verse part of the tune, the refrain being adapted from another (unspecified) traditional tune. With a vocal range E to F this piece transgresses V.W.’s principle—reiterated in the preface to *SP*—of fixing ‘the pitch of each tune as low as possible for the sake of mixed congregations’. More important, the tune is too repetitive and so Sullivan here still reigns supreme.

The year 1927 saw the publication (by Curwen) of Holst’s anthem ‘MAN BORN TO TOIL’ to words by Robert Bridges. The last section of this, ‘GIRD ON THY SWORD’, was included in the enlarged *Songs of Praise* in 1931 under the name of Bridges’s home ‘CHILSWELL’ at Boar’s Hill, near Oxford. In *SP* the tune was, one suspects, little used, but John Wilson rescued it for J.R. Peacey’s ‘Filled with the Spirit’s power’ in *Sixteen Hymns of Today* (RSCM 1978) and it is used for the same words in *Hymns and Psalms*. In 1928 Holst wrote the incidental music to John Masefield’s mystery play *The Coming of Christ* and conducted the first performance in Canterbury Cathedral on 28 May. The seventh item, a modal setting of the words ‘By weary stages the old world ages’, was taken into the 1931 *SP* under the name ‘HILL CREST’ (Masefield’s home at that time, also at Boar’s Hill), but neither words nor tune seem to have travelled further. Erik Routley commented that both ‘CHILSWELL’ and ‘HILL CREST’ were ‘as hard and chaste as any sculptor could wish’. Alas, the British public is not noted for its appreciation of sculpture.

To complete the story we should mention an adaptation from an anthem ‘How mighty are the sabbaths’ appearing in *The Clarendon Hymn Book* (1936) and the *New Catholic Hymnal* (1971). Much better known is Holst’s elaboration (1919) of ‘THE OLD 124TH’ with its insistent tramping bass; this has also been adapted for congregational use though unfortunately retaining the sub-Christian text ‘Turn back, O man’. Both of these adaptations were made, c. 1930, by Thomas Fielden, then director of music at Charterhouse.

If some of these tunes have not become popular the fault is more with the words than the music. Holst coped well with tricky metres and above all he showed, particularly in the 1906 tunes, a sure sense of what an untutored congregation will warm to. This ‘common touch’ is by no means always to be found in composers of what might be termed symphonic status. It is surely not without significance that all his life Holst enjoyed working with amateur musicians, and spent much of his time and energy on teaching. At all events, to have at least three-fourteenths of one’s output in the standard repertory is a proportion which any composer might envy.

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