

## Holst: In the Footsteps

James Lancelot *organ*

The Oriel Singers *with Ben Sawyer conductor*

All Saint's Church

Saturday 13 July

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Gustav Holst	Nunc Dimittis	4'
Imogen Holst	Hymne to Christ	3'
Gustav Holst	From 'Four Organ Voluntaries' 2. <i>Allegretto Pastorale</i> 3. <i>Postlude in C</i>	10'
Gustav Holst	Five Partsongs, Op. 12	15'
Ralph Vaughan Williams	<i>Three Preludes founded on Welsh hymn tunes</i> i. <i>Bryn Calfaria</i> ii. <i>Rhosymedre</i> iii. <i>Hyfrydol</i>	9'
Gustav Holst	<i>I Vow to Thee my Country</i>	4'

### About the Programme

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The second part of the Holst: In the Footsteps Concert is held at All Saints Church, the residency of Holst's organist father. It explores Holst's connection to the church and his contribution to vocal music that, while perhaps not as well trodden as Holst's instrumental and orchestral repertoire, nonetheless provides plenty of nuance and variety to explore.

The Gloucestershire-based Oriel Singers open with Gustav Holst's Nunc Dimittis. Holst uses text from Luke 2:29-32 - "Sovereign Lord, as you have been promised, / you may now dismiss your servant in peace." The piece starts from nothing - Holst slowly building up a chord from the bass to the sopranos, before introducing a heavenly melody in the soprano line. Counterpoint is used abundantly and expertly throughout, and there are solo moments for both soprano and tenor with a call and answer with the rest of the choir. The piece has been overlooked historically, partially due to it remaining unpublished until 1979, 64 years after it was originally composed.

Imogen Holst's Hymne to Christ depicts a strong and meaningful religious connection to Christ. The church played an important role in the musical life of the Holst family, including Imogen who became involved in the musical activities of Aldeburgh Parish Church. The lyrics are based on the poetry of John Donne, a 16th Century religious scholar and poet.

Two of Gustav Holst's four Voluntaries follow, and are some of his earliest published works in 1891. This work is firmly grounded in a Mendelssohnic-like Romanticism. His Allegretto pastorale is a gentle 6/8 that does not aim to push the conventions of the style too far, with a fulfilling rondo form and brief interludes in the relative minor. The Postlude is a contrasting voluntary, making use of the reed stops to imitate a brass fanfare at several points in the piece. In both of these voluntaries, there is a sense of elegance and status.

Holst's Five Partsongs follows, written at the turn of the 20th Century. Dream Tryst, with text by Francis Thompson creates an ethereal texture of sounds. While being a secular work, there is a religious quality to the song - perhaps through the text's allusions to the cycle of life and death. Thomas Heywood provides the text for the next song, Ye

little birds, opening with an immediate contrast to the first. There is a jubilant feeling, created through the use of large leaps of intervals with a slight bounce off of each monosyllabic word, and pleasant use of contrapuntal textures. Her eyes the glowworm lend thee is a shorter part song, written as a fugue and ending almost abruptly. The jubilant atmosphere of Ye Little Birds returns with the penultimate part song Now is the month of Maying. This part song is Holst's reinterpretation of an English ballet written by Thomas Morley in 1595 which is regularly performed at Magdalen College, Oxford's May Morning celebrations. The text setting for the vocables Fa la la la is spread across all eight voices, creating a cascading effect in the vocal texture, with arpeggio figures reminiscent of celebratory bells. The final part song, Come To Me is a setting of Christina Rossetti's poem of the same name. Holst's use of haunting close harmony is a fitting conclusion to a varied and adventurous collection of part songs.

Ralph Vaughan Williams contributes the next item in the programme - his 1940 work Three Preludes on Welsh Hymns sets three traditional Welsh hymn tunes to extensive organ embellishment and rearrangement. Bryn Calfaria is the first hymn tune to be arranged - the prelude opens with cascading descending scales, before the sombre entrance of the main hymn tune theme. This tune is developed and embellished with counterpoint, melodic variation and the frequent return of the opening scalic idea. A prelude on Rhosymedre follows, which receives a more sensitive, quieter rendition when compared to the hymn tune in the first prelude. There is a mournful quality - with the piece being written shortly after World War One, the experiences from which had a serious impact on the composer. The final prelude Hyfrydol combines the most expressive elements of the first two preludes - there is a sense of arrival, of triumph but also the reflective atmosphere of the second prelude. This tune seemed to have been a favourite of the composer, who reused it in the finale of his similarly-named composition Prelude on Three Welsh Hymn Tunes written for the Salvation Army Brass Band shortly before his death in 1958.

The concert concludes with Holst's patriotic hymn I Vow To Thee My Country. Holst was tasked in 1921 to set Sir Cecil Spring Rice's poem to music - and according to Imogen Holst, was 'relieved' to find that his previous theme for Jupiter from The Planets Suite fitted the text almost perfectly! The tune was later also known as Thaxted, after the village that Holst spent most of his life in and where he was the organist and choirmaster of the local church. As one of Holst's most iconic and transcendent melodies, it is a fitting conclusion to this celebration of Holst's life.

Programme notes written by Oliver Picken (RPS Young Classical Writers Prize).

## Artist Biographies

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### **James Lancelot** *organ*

James Lancelot has enjoyed a career as one of Britain's leading cathedral organists. A Chorister of St Paul's Cathedral, Organ Scholar of King's College, Cambridge, Sub-Organist of Winchester Cathedral, and then for thirty-two years Master of the Choristers and Organist of Durham Cathedral, he continues to be in demand; in retirement he has served periods as Interim Organist and Director of Music of Worcester Cathedral and Acting Organist of New College, Oxford. Alongside a distinguished career as a church musician and choir trainer – at Durham he was responsible for the foundation of a new choir (Durham Cathedral Consort of Singers) and for the introduction of girl Choristers into the cathedral choir – he enjoys a wide-ranging career as a solo organist. He has ten solo CDs and two DVDs to his credit; recital venues this year include St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham, Southwell Minster, Durham Cathedral, and Paisley, Hexham and Tewkesbury Abbeys.

### **The Oriel Singers**

The Oriel Singers was founded in 1975 by George Mathers, an architect living in Cheltenham. Initially just a quartet, the original members of the choir met at George's house in Oriel Terrace, a venue that gave the choir its name, and then continued to rehearse for many years in George's new home in Thirstaine Road.

The Oriel Singers have performed with distinguished groups such as The Orlando Consort, The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and I Fagiolini and have also broadcast recitals on BBC Radio 3 and services on BBC Radio 4, given concert tours in Ireland, France, Belgium, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Italy, and sung services in many of the great English cathedrals. They have also been invited to take part in various music festivals, including the prestigious Cheltenham International Festival of Music and Three Choirs Festivals.

Back in 2005 the Oriel Singers were the winners of the BBC Radio 3 Choir of the Year competition, and under the dynamic leadership of their current musical director, Ben Sawyer, who joined the group in 2015, they have continued to perform to the highest level.