THE WANING OF VICTORIAN IMPERIALISM: STYLISTIC DUALISM IN
GUSTAV HOLST'S ONE-ACT OPERA SĀVITRI (1908-9)

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Gustav Holst’s one-act opera *Sāvitri* (1908-9) represents a turning point in his compositional style, which came at a significant time in British history. Holst combines a simpler style informed by his work with English folksong with the Wagnerian style that permeated his earlier compositions. Although influenced by a British imperialist view of the world, *Sāvitri* renders Hindu-Indian culture in positive terms without relying on the purely exotic, offers a perspective on gender relationships that does not depend solely on convention, and presents the commoner as the British ideal rather than romanticizing the aristocracy. The result is an opera subtle in its complexity, approaching the profound themes of love, death, and spirituality with emotional restraint and self-control.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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SĀVITRI, OP. 25
By Gustav Holst
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INTRODUCTION

Gustav Holst composed his one-act chamber opera Sāvitri during a time in his nation’s history, 1908-1909, when Britons were redefining their own identity. Britain was no longer the cosmopolitan center of Western Europe, nor the political and economical power it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the Empire’s grasp on its colonies gradually loosened, a drive for domestic and social transformation to some extent replaced ambition for global expansion. The transformation in social and political climate caused Britons to reevaluate what it meant to be “British.” Divergent views of the British Self emerged. Some Britons desperately held to the class hierarchies of the past that defined their role in society while others sought a new approach to defining British identity that idealized the “folk” and sought to abolish Victorian class structures.

Sāvitri is in part Holst’s artistic contribution to the social debate. Holst rejected the social structures that supported the aristocracy. To him the future of British identity lay in the hands of the “common man.” This idea of casting off the lavishness of the middle- and upper-class Victorian lifestyle shaped his views concerning other social arenas. His teaching philosophy, his political viewpoint, his religious beliefs, and his compositional output reflect a desire for simplicity. In his music, he incorporates English folk melodies that represented the common man to counterbalance the post-

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Wagnerian musical language permeating contemporary compositions, including his earlier opera *Sita*.  

Holst’s *Sāvitri* represents this new aesthetic. In this work, Holst reduced an opera to its bare parts. Stagecraft is non-existent, and ensemble forces are small, with only three characters and an orchestra consisting of two string quartets, a contrabass, two flutes, and an English horn.  

The libretto is also condensed to include only a small section of the original episode as found in the *Mahābhārata*, the Indian text from which Holst took the story.

Although Holst appreciated Hindu-Indian culture, the imperial perspective so prevalent during that time still influences his compositions.  

The libretto for *Sāvitri* adapts an Indian text that Holst would not have known if the cultural trade between the British metropole and its peripheral colonies had not existed. Also, Holst’s new aesthetics of simplicity, especially in the opera’s libretto, parallels the imperialist tendency to present other cultures through a universal perspective that minimizes cultural differences. Holst uses the Hindu-Indian text to express his own philosophical views of universality, removing any elements that do not match his perspective. Traits that are specifically Hindu-Indian are eliminated in favor of characteristics that are, if anything, British.

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The influence of the imperialist perspective, however, does not lead Holst to create caricatures of Hindu-Indian music as seen in other Western adaptations of Eastern cultures. References to the “exotic” are present in the opera but are more closely related to mysticism and Holst’s notions of transcendence than they are references to cultural “Otherness.” Dorian melodies, bare vocal lines, and other neo-modal stylistic traits are symptomatic of an attempt to utilize an English folk idiom within a conventional late-romantic musical language. With this, Holst is part of a movement to construct a post-Victorian British musical identity that, while influenced by imperial appropriation and assimilation of the Other, at the same time presents the Other in more positive terms.

Holst’s Sanskrit Works

Sāvitri forms part of a set of works by Holst that were greatly influenced by his interest in Hindu-Indian culture. These compositions, usually called his Sanskrit works, appear at a turning point within Holst’s compositional style after his early works, such as the overture Walt Whitman (1899), and the Cotswolds Symphony, op.8 (1899), and before his best-known work, The Planets (1914-16). The Wagnerian idioms permeating his earlier compositions gave way to a style inspired by English folksong. Although some post-Wagnerian characteristics remained a part of his compositional language, folk idioms also appear in Holst’s new style.

An interest in Hindu-Indian culture played a role in his stylistic change. Although he relied heavily on English translations and adaptations of the originals, this interest motivated him to read Sanskrit texts and set selections from various Hindu-Indian sources, such as the Rig Veda, the Bhagavad Gita, the Rāmāyana, and the Mahābhārata,

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to music. The resulting works include *Indra* (1903), a symphonic poem; twenty hymns from the *Rig Veda* (1907-11), set with various ensemble forces such as solo voice and piano to choir and orchestra; the *Cloud Messenger* (1912), a large-scale choral and orchestral work; and his two operas *Sita* (1906) and *Sāvitrī* (1908-09).

**Theoretical Framework**

Because *Sāvitrī* is a product of a post-Victorian variant of national imperialism, I consulted diverse resources available on post-colonial and nationalist theory. From Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* to a more recent counterpart by David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, scholars have taken different approaches to explain the forces that shaped European imperialism. Whereas Said focuses on race as the foundation of colonialism and paints a picture of how literature and mass media helped maintain cultural biases and prejudices that favor the West, Cannadine emphasizes social classes, stressing the idealizing view of the British toward their hierarchical system of class, which they wanted to spread across their empire. Both writers, however, as well as numerous others who have written about colonialism, see this as a hegemonic imperial project with homogenization as the main objective. Many British colonists attempted to reproduce an idealized version of their country around the world, replacing native with British cultural traits.

As a domestic by-product of the colonialist mentality, *Sāvitrī* reveals a more specific ideology found in English discourse of the time, an Indo-Aryan ideal that became popular in Western literature. R. W. Frazer’s *Silent Gods and Sun-Steeped Lands*,

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7 See Chapter 1 for further discussion of Holst’s knowledge of Sanskrit texts.


published in 1896, for example, romantically portrayed India through poetic versions of Hindu stories, emphasizing the similarities between English and Indian cultures. Widely read in Britain, the book strongly influenced Holst’s Sanskrit works. Frazer’s book illustrates a paradox in English literature that, on the one hand, created fantastic images of India and, on the other, emphasized the universal elements perceived in Hindu-Indian culture. Frazer presents a popular romantic view of a Hindu-Aryan kinship influenced by current scholarship:

All Hindu people bow down before Brāhmans, counting them as holy, of divine birth, very gods among men. Inheritors and guardians of the sacred lore and learning of the past, the Brāhmans trace back their descent from the ancient Vedic sages, and claim kindred with the Aryan races of the West.

This popular view of India in Britain perpetuated a discourse that allowed little room for Hindu-Indian culture’s dissimilarities. India was both the exotic Other, distant, foreign, and primitive, and the ancestor of modern Western civilization.

The Whigish progressivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encouraged a hierarchy of cultures with British culture as the zenith. As a result, the Other was presented as homogenous and inferior in a discourse that did not foster a dialogue with the Other but rather attempted to “explain” and to “understand” the culture, reducing it to its similarities with those in the position of power. This reduction, combined with social and political repression in the colonies, produced a population unable to speak: a “subaltern” with no voice in the cultural discourse. Monolithic


11 Continental Europe was also caught up in the popularity of the “exotic” India, as discussed in Lawrence Kramer, Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), especially the chapter “Consuming the Exotic.”

discourse speaks for the subaltern, perpetuating the relationship of social and political power represented in the discourse.

In India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all power rested in English culture. Only by being assimilated into English culture, educated in British schools, and taught British ideas could those of Indian descent regain political power. It is in this elite Indian group that the seeds of Indian nationalism began to take root. In effect, the new Indian elite fighting for independence from Great Britain by using rhetoric filled with references to a return to Indian culture were aiding in the suppression of that culture. The British-educated Indians helped maintain the monolithic discourse on a new level by speaking for their fellow Indians who had no voice in the global discourse. The British public, including Holst, received their information about Hindu-Indian culture through this limited discourse.

Because of the political climate surrounding the creation of the opera and Holst’s assimilation of Hindu texts into his ideology, Śāvitri is somewhat of a paradox it its attempt to portray the Hindu-Indian culture in positive terms while, at the same time, demonstrating the strong influence of the imperialist perspective. The Śāvitri episode became a colonial cultural product that Holst used to present his ideas, both related and foreign to Hindu-Indian philosophy, in a Western art music format.

In close ideological proximity to colonialism is nationalism. Both play vital roles in the shaping of Śāvitri, since many British intellectuals were questioning British national identity during the opera’s conception. By employing an English folk idiom and other elements that attempt to distinguish British music from its European counterparts,

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Holst contributed to a movement aimed at reconstructing a national music while trying to find a unique musical style less influenced by German composers.

Recent theories on nationalism have revealed complex tendencies in the formation of a national identity, which have made agreement among scholars on nationalism elusive if not impossible. The two major schools of thought on the issue are the “ethnosymbolists” or “primordialists” and the “modernists.”\(^{14}\) The ethnosymbolists and primordialists, who include Anthony D. Smith, John Hutchinson, and John Armstrong, view a nation as strongly connected to a group’s ethnic past. The modernists, including Michael Mann, Charles Tilly, and John Breuilly, consider nations as a recent political invention. Both sides present interesting insights into the social theories surrounding nationalism. These, together with Miroslav Hroch’s model of national movements in Eastern Europe and Adrian Hastings’s book *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, offer diverse approaches to the historical prerequisites for British national identity in the twentieth century. Also of great importance to this project is John Francmanis’s article “National music to national redeemer: the consolidation of a ‘folk-song’ construct in Edwardian England,” which demonstrates the English folksong movement’s involvement in the construction of British national identity.\(^{15}\)

As mentioned previously, Holst’s participation in the English folksong movement had a drastic effect on his compositional output. His musical style in *Sāvitri* exhibits a dichotomy of musical languages. Holst’s fascination with English folksong directed his musical language away from the post-Wagnerian chromaticism of his earlier compositions and toward diatonicism and folk idioms. Holst still operates in a tonal


idiom, but he does not limit his tonal language to the major/minor system. Instead, Holst expands his tonal language to include elements outside the major/minor scale, such as “modal”\textsuperscript{16} and whole-tone scales.

Literature and Sources on Holst

Most of the writings on Gustav Holst depend heavily on his daughter, Imogen Holst (1907-84). Biographical writings use quotes and publications by Imogen, a composer and conductor, as primary sources. Numerous other publications employ Imogen’s ideas about her father as the foundation for larger arguments.\textsuperscript{17} Recent articles by Raymond Head have, however, revealed some discrepancies.\textsuperscript{18} For example, one of Head’s more revealing argument concerns Holst’s knowledge of Hindu-Indian culture, specifically his knowledge of Sanskrit. Head demonstrates that previous biographies slightly exaggerated the composer’s abilities in this area. Although this may appear to be a minor detail, it sheds a different light on Holst’s relationship to Hindu-Indian culture. Also, subsequent writings on Gustav Holst’s compositions have carried with them Imogen’s view of her father struggling to find his own individual voice but ultimately failing to do so. Despite the various limitations of Imogen’s biographical writings, they do contain information valuable for the study of Gustav Holst and provide insights into his life on a very personal level, as well as presenting the opinions that have shaped music history’s view of this composer.

\textsuperscript{16} “Modal” refers to the application by certain composers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of melodic elements perceived in folksongs.


A more recent biography by Michael Short exhibits the strong influence of Imogen Holst’s writings on the perception of Gustav Holst.\(^\text{19}\) Short, however, also utilizes letters, diary entries, and other published and unpublished materials by Gustav, as well as statements from his acquaintances, friends, students, and colleagues. Short presents a chronological framework for studying Gustav’s life and a stylistic overview of his compositions. Short has also published a chronological catalogue of documents related to Gustav Holst, a useful resource concerning available primary source materials.\(^\text{20}\)

Another valuable resource for primary sources is Jon C. Mitchell’s *A Comprehensive Biography of Composer Gustav Holst with Correspondence and Diary Excerpts, Including His American Years.*\(^\text{21}\) This book helps to organize Holst’s many letters, both those reproduced in the book and those available in other publications. Mitchell presents the material in chronological order and provides a connecting narrative, elaborating on the sources with information from other published and unpublished writings.

**Holst’s Operas**

The previously mentioned material and other musicological writings have not adequately discussed the nine operas and operettas by Gustav Holst.\(^\text{22}\) This thesis will


\(^{22}\) These include three unpublished operas, *The Revoke* (1895), *The Youth’s Choice* (1902), and *Sita* (1900-06); two unpublished operettas, *Lansdown Castle* (1892) and *The Idea* (1898); and four published operas, *Sāvitrī* (1908-09), *The Perfect Fool* (1918-22), *At the Boar’s Head* (1924), and *The Wandering Scholar* (1929-30).
treat one of Holst’s more famous dramatic works in light of current academic approaches, providing insight into the social context of the work and the dichotomy between a general post-Wagnerian musical style and a style more uniquely Holst’s that incorporates English folksong idioms. Sāvitrī represents multiple layers of British culture during the early twentieth century. On one level, it is a piece influenced by a national-imperialist mentality that appropriates another culture and selects specific elements from that culture to fit it into one person’s developing philosophical system. On another level, the opera is the product of a composer seeking an alternative to traditional Western views on society and religion and using a blend of late-romantic compositional techniques with new ones influenced by English folksong idioms, motivated by a desire to find a musical language at once distinctively English and his own. The result is an opera subtle in its complexity, approaching the profound themes of love, death, and spirituality with emotional restraint and self-control.
CHAPTER 1
LIBRETTO SOURCE FOR SĀVITRI

Sāvitrī exemplifies Eastern influences, specifically Hindu-Indian, on Western literature. A consequence of the meeting of these two cultures was a focus on the exotic elements of the culture, creating a caricature of the Other. As European cultures became more familiar with their Eastern counterparts during the nineteenth century, an interest in common ideas between Eastern and Western cultures replaced the emphasis on the exotic. These ideas were absorbed into Western public discourse, often eliminating elements that did not conform to the new context and adding elements to the original. Sāvitrī represents this paradox in Western literature concerning Hindu-Indian culture, a culture viewed as valuable because of its perceived similarities to Western ideas.

The Mahābhārata

The lure of Eastern ideas led Holst to compose several vocal and a few programmatic works\(^1\) influenced by Hindu-Indian texts that were originally written in Sanskrit, the classical Indo-Aryan language of Hinduism. Although he relied heavily on modern English translations, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the ultimate source for Holst’s libretto for Sāvitrī is a complex story taken from the Sanskrit epic the Mahābhārata. The Mahābhārata is considered the longest poem in the world with about 75,000 verses and consists of several framed stories, pointing toward its origins in oral tradition.\(^2\) In its written form, the poem is contained in eighteen books, or parvas. The main characters of the epic are five brothers—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and

\(^1\) Other compositions that fall into this category are a symphonic poem Indra (1903), a previous opera Sīta (1906), a cantata The Cloud Messenger (1909–10), and the vocal settings Hymns from the Rig Veda (1908-12).

Sahadeva. The brothers, part of the Pandava branch of a ruling family in north India, are in a feud with their cousins the Kauravas. The feud results in the expulsion of the Pandava brothers and an eighteen-day battle that kills most of the other characters in the epic. The Sāvitri episode occurs during the brothers’ expulsion in the forest.

Sanskrit Texts in Europe

Sanskrit texts were not available to Westerners until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Before then, the inherent difficulties of the language and the shortage of Sanskrit specialists resulted in inadequate translations of the texts. Translating a text that is complex even for native readers took years to accomplish with the available personnel capable of completing the work. Despite these difficulties, a scholarly translation of a portion of the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavadgītā, was published in English in 1785 by Charles Wilkins. Wilkins intended to translate the entire Mahābhārata by the time he presented it to the Governor General of India in 1784, but he was only partially successful, completing about a third of the entire epic. His translation of the Śakuntalā episode, a narrated story about the birth of Bharata, the ancestor of the Kurus, in 1794 marked the end of the published material from his endeavors. From that time on, the Bhagavadgītā has been the most widely known section of the Mahābhārata and, together with other sections of the Mahābhārata, such as the Śakuntalā, became source material for numerous English and German authors, including Goethe. By the mid-nineteenth century, European composers incorporated episodes from the Mahābhārata into their work. In 1865, the Hungarian composer Karl Goldmark (1830-1915), for

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4 Brockington, The Sanskrit Epics, 42.
example, completed his musical overture Šakuntalā (1865), programmatically based on the Šakuntalā episode.⁶

Although numerous authors utilized the Sāvitrī episode in their literary works, the Bhagavadgītā remained the most influential section of the Mahābhārata. By 1802, Wilkins’s translation, in particular, was widely read and published in other languages, including French, German, and Russian.⁷ The original English version did not reach the same levels of popularity in Britain but did find a receptive audience in the United States. The New England transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, for instance, were strongly influenced by the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā. Thoreau even retranslated a French translation of the Harivamśa by Simon Alexandre Langlois into English.⁸ The ideas that emerged from the New England transcendentalists’ interest in Hindu-Indian culture would later appear in works by Walt Whitman, an American poet influential in Holst’s interest in Hindu-Indian culture.⁹

The first semi-complete translation of the Mahābhārata into a European language was Fauche’s Le Mahābhārata, poème épique, a ten-volume work published in fragments between 1863 and 1870. Although Fauche died before completing the translation, the final version included all sections up to the Karna-parvan, “Book of Karna,” including a translation of the Sāvitrī story.

Besides the afore-mentioned more critical translations, there were also several adaptations of stories from the Mahābhārata into European poems and prose. As mentioned before, sections of the Mahābhārata became source material for European

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⁶ Ibid.


⁸ Ibid., 516.

⁹ Ralph Vaughan Williams set Whitman’s poem “Passage to India” in *Sea Symphony* (1910).
authors. One such author was R. W. Frazer, who published his book *Silent Gods and Sun-Steeped Lands* in 1895, the same year as the Empire of India Exhibition in London.

Frazer’s book provides a glimpse into the perspective of some Europeans on Indian culture. The idea of a merger of Indian and European philosophies is prominent in his book.\(^{10}\) Frazer links the knowledge in Indian philosophy with ancient Greek philosophy and sees Indian philosophy as the way to a higher knowledge. Frazer writes,

> To-day, wise men in our own land find in the depths of their philosophy all that has been reasoned out by the ancient philosophers of Greece and the deepest minds of to-day in the West. Others, vainly seeking to pierce through the dark mystery of Creation, would fain believe that to ascetic Brāhmaṇ sages and Mahātmas of India, secret knowledge of the Unknown has been revealed, and that their souls, rising above all the trammels of the body, wander free at will.\(^{11}\)

This quote demonstrates a belief that Hinduism represents a transcendent knowledge, a common feature of theosophy. The Theosophical Society, founded in the United States by Elena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875, promotes the position that true knowledge comes through direct communion of the soul with divine reality, a belief based on Hindu and Buddhist thought. Frazer’s book is saturated with the idea that India holds the key to mystical knowledge valuable to Western civilization, an idea popular in Britain at this time and shared by several philosophical and religious groups including theosophists\(^{12}\) and New England transcendentalists. Although Holst had been interested in such ideas since his student years and had been exposed to theosophy as a young boy, Frazer’s book introduced him to Indian texts and encouraged him to study other translations of Sanskrit texts.

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\(^{10}\) The merging of Eastern wisdom with Western philosophy was prevalent in German philosophical and literary writings of the early nineteenth century, including Friedrich Schlegel’s *Über die Sprache und Weisheit* (1808).


\(^{12}\) Reincarnation, another feature of theosophy, also has its roots in the Hindu doctrine of *Karma*. 
Holst shared the ideas conveyed in Frazer’s book. Indeed, Holst’s interest in things “Indian” appears in some of his earliest letters. He appreciated the control of emotion that Indian philosophy and culture stressed, and his distrust of Christianity led him to look in other directions for an ideological framework. He also had support from his friend Ralph Vaughn Williams, who fostered his interest in Hindu philosophy.\textsuperscript{13} His early readings of Walt Whitman likewise reinforced his fondness for the philosophy. Walt Whitman’s poem “A Passage to India,” very likely familiar to Holst, paints a portrait of India as “reason’s early paradise” and the place of “wisdom’s birth.” Holst answered Whitman’s challenge to seek out the land—although only figuratively, for he never traveled to India—by studying Sanskrit texts and adaptations of Sanskrit texts. A family member also exposed Holst to ideas linked to Hindu philosophy. According to Colin Matthews, Holst’s stepmother was “more concerned with religion and theosophy than with her family.”\textsuperscript{14} She also held theosophy meetings at their home, which afforded Holst an early glimpse into a philosophy that would influence his life and compositions.

Ralph Griffith’s Adaptations of Sanskrit Texts

Ralph T. H. Griffith (1826-1905), who translated segments of Sanskrit texts, including parts of the \textit{Mahābhārata} and the Vedic Hymns, had a large impact on Holst. Griffith, a retired Indian civil servant, had published his \textit{Specimens of Old Indian Poetry} in 1852 and was known for bringing Sanskrit texts to the general public through his various popular translations.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15} Head, “Holst and India (I): ‘Maya’ to ‘Sita’,” 4.
The bulk of Holst’s Indian compositions are based on Griffith’s *Idylls from the Sanskrit* (1866), including *Sita* and *Sāvitri*. Holst also used Griffith’s *Specimens* for the text to *The Cloud Messengers* and Griffith’s two-volume work *Hymns of the Rig Veda* (1889-92) for the text to the song group of the same title. Holst relied especially on the 113th Hymn of Book 2, from which he took significant sections verbatim. Griffith’s publications offered Holst a readily available source for Sanskrit texts translated into English.

Although Holst used Griffith’s translation of the Vedic Hymns for the text to his *Hymns from the Rig Veda* and was aware of Griffith’s adaptation of the Sāvitri story in his *Idylls from the Sanskrit*, the composer does not adhere so closely to Griffith’s *Sāvitri*. Griffith’s version is, by far, truer to the original than Holst’s opera. Most of the “Indian” elements of the story are maintained in Griffith’s translation. The names of the gods, the entire story—from king Aśvapati’s prayer to the goddess Sāvitri to the rejoicing of the parents of Satyavān’s return—are all present in Griffith’s translation. The rituals are missing, but the Hindu gods are mentioned by name and the quoting of the Laws by Sāvitri is included. (These Hindu elements will be discussed later in this chapter.)

Griffith’s *Idylls from the Sanskrit* and *Specimens of Old Indian Poetry* run into the typical obstacles of adapting Sanskrit texts to the genre constraints of Western literature. The *Mahābhārata* contains elements that defy a single category. Griffith, however, treats the text as poetry. His adaptations are, as the titles suggest, “specimens” taken from various sources and presented as selections. Besides the Sāvitri episode from the

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17 Ibid., 5.

Mahābhārata, his *Idylls from the Sanskrit* contains sections from Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvanśa*, Birth of the War-God, and Seasons and Vālmiki’s Rāmāyana. Each section is translated and adapted to produce rhymed couplets with each couplet forming a complete sentence in most cases.

Holst’s Knowledge of the Sanskrit Language

Many of Holst’s biographers have taken his knowledge of Sanskrit for granted. Imogen Holst, his daughter, published a biography of her father in 1938 in which she claimed that Holst had the ability to make his own translations of Sanskrit texts. In the 1986 revised edition of the biography, the idea remains:

It was his single-minded sincerity that had led him to explore the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gītā. The idea of non-attachment was to have a lasting influence on his life and on his music. Since 1899 he had been trying to learn Sanskrit, and had been working laboriously at his own translations of hymns from the Rig Veda and dramatic episodes from the Ramāyāna.19

In one of the most recent bibliographies on Holst, Jon C. Mitchell claims that Holst “was frustrated with the available English translations, which were either paraphrases or did not convey the true meaning of the texts.” He continues by questioning if Holst had read Griffith’s translation of the *Rig Veda* and asserts that Holst took lessons in Sanskrit “to acquire some sort of working knowledge of the language.”20 Colin Matthews states in a sentence that seems to contradict itself that Holst mastered “little more than the alphabet” and, with this limited knowledge, was “able to make his own adaptations of the Sanskrit texts.”21

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Holst was undoubtedly very interested in Sanskrit texts, but the extent to which he
could translate the Sanskrit language has often been exaggerated. If one realizes the
difficulties involved in learning Sanskrit and the hindrances to Holst’s studying it
sufficiently, the likelihood that he could work with the language on the level required to
produce the libretti for his compositions is slim. During the period that biographers claim
he studied and translated Sanskrit texts, he had little time to devote to such studies. As
Raymond Head states, “Holst was immensely busy in the late 1890’s, playing trombone
in the White Viennese Band at numerous seaside resorts, in the Carl Rosa Opera
Company, and the Scottish Orchestra.”

During this time, he was courting his future
wife Isobel Harrison and, furthermore, was in no financial situation to pay for extensive
classes in Sanskrit. Holst also stated in a letter to W. G. Whittaker in May 1917 that he
never “managed to learn a foreign language.”

Casting additional doubt on whether Holst translated the Sanskrit text for his
Indian compositions is the level of ability needed to find, let alone translate, the relatively
short episode within its original context. The Sāvitri story, although widely known at the
time, is difficult to find in the maze of stories that make up the entire Mahābhārata, a
work with a structure that is difficult to navigate even for specialists. Holst did not have
the necessary knowledge or time to probe the thousands of lines of text to bring out the
elements he specifically wanted for his libretto. Instead, as Short states in his Gustav

22 Head, “Holst and India (I): ‘Maya’ to ‘Sita’,” 4.

23 Holst did, however, have an acquaintance who was able to aid him in his adaptations of the
Sanskrit text into English, Mabel Bode, a Sanskrit scholar and a close friend. Many of the previously
quoted biographies state that it is she who gave Holst lessons in Sanskrit. This is, however, highly unlikely
since, as Head states, she was busy either taking her doctorate or studying in Paris with Sylvain Lévi, a
French orientalist. Still, she may have been an important resource in Holst’s understanding of Sanskrit texts
if not of the language. (See Head, “Holst and India (I)” 158/4-5.)

24 Holst, Gustav, Gustav Holst, Letters to W. G. Whittaker, ed. Michael Short ([Glasgow]:
Holst: The Man and his Music, Holst more than likely used published translations and adaptations of Sanskrit texts.\textsuperscript{25}

The Original Sāvitri Episode\textsuperscript{26}

The Sāvitri episode is found in the section of the epic \textit{Vana-parva}, or “Forest Book,” which tells of the Pandavas’ expulsion in the forest region. After the Pandava brother Yudhishtira discovers that his wife has been captured by the king of Sindhu Jayadratha, the \textit{rishi}\textsuperscript{27} Markandeya tells a story about the most honorable woman Sāvitri in order to demonstrate the loyalty of a Hindu woman.\textsuperscript{28}

The story of Sāvitri opens with Aśvapati, the king of Madra, offering prayers and sacrifices for a child to inherit his kingdom. The goddess Sāvitri appears to the king and grants the king a daughter. The king is so pleased with the goddess that he names his daughter Sāvitri after her. As Sāvitri matures, the king is unhappy because there is no suitable husband for his daughter. He finally allows Sāvitri to go on a trip to find a suitable mate. Sāvitri comes across Satyavān, a prince who is exiled from his kingdom, much like the Pandavas, with his father Dyumatsena, a blind, dethroned king. Satyavān


\textsuperscript{27} A rishi is a sage, usually a hermit, who is the storyteller of the smaller episodes found in the \textit{Mahābhārata} and is the symbol of religious authority in Hindu-Indian culture.

\textsuperscript{28} Many of the smaller episodes in the \textit{Mahābhārata} are introduced in this manner. A rishi, or sage, appears, usually with little warning to the reader, and presents a story to elaborate on the idea presented at that moment. This framing technique provides clues to the origins of the \textit{Mahābhārata} in oral tradition and its early dependence on religious leaders, whose duty it was to spread the early Hindu values through stories that embody those values.
and his family live a simple life in the forest. Sāvitri immediately falls in love with the forest prince and returns to her father with the good news.

Meanwhile, the famous sage Nārada visits the king. When Sāvitri returns and tells her father the good news and the name of her new suitor, Nārada proclaims that Sāvitri has made a horrible mistake in her choice of a mate: although Satyavān is an honorable man, he is destined to die in a year. The king attempts to persuade Sāvitri not to marry Satyavān, but eventually fulfills his promise and allows the two to wed.

Sāvitri and Satyavān are married in a very elaborate ceremony that focuses on Sāvitri’s knowledge of the rituals, which she performs according to Hindu law. The two then return to Satyavān’s home in the forest, where Sāvitri awaits the dreaded day when Satyavān is to die. When the day arrives, Sāvitri performs several rituals to gain the favor of the gods. Satyavān, against the wishes of his family and wife, goes to the forest to chop wood and gather fruit and berries, Sāvitri accompanying him. While he is chopping wood, he starts to feel weak and lies down with his head in Sāvitri’s lap. After Satyavān complains of a headache and closes his eyes to rest, a figure appears. The mysterious figure approaches the couple and, taking a thumb-sized object from Satyavān, places a noose around it, and leaves. As the mysterious man departs, Sāvitri follows and asks who he is. The man answers that he is Yama, the god of death and he has come to take Satyavān’s soul to the land of the dead.

29 The word usually used for forest in the Mahābhārata and other Sanskrit texts encompasses a wider range of meaning. The forest is not just an area with trees and other vegetation, but an “uncivilized” region, or that which lies outside of the village. The forest conjures romantic images of the unknown. Feelings of fear, awe, and mystery are invoked by the use of the term. The forest was also the land for those separated, voluntarily or involuntarily, from society, as is the case for both the main characters in this particular episode, Sāvitri and Satyavān, and the Pandavas in the larger story. (See J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans. and ed., Mahābhārata: Book 3, The Book of the Forest [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975], 175-76.)
Sāvitri continues to follow Yama despite his attempts to persuade her to stay. Yama is moved by Sāvitri’s loyalty to her husband and grants her a boon—anything except the life of Satyavān. She asks Yama for the sight of her father-in-law. He grants her wish and continues on with Sāvitri close behind. Yama stops again and beseeches her to stay. She again refuses, and Yama responds to her demonstration of loyalty with the granting of another boon. This time Sāvitri asks for the restoration of her father-in-law’s kingdom. Yama grants it and continues on his journey. Sāvitri again follows and is granted another boon. Sāvitri asks for a hundred sons for her own father, and it is granted. The same events are repeated again with Sāvitri asking for a hundred sons for herself. With every request, Sāvitri recites a part of the Law. Finally, Yama is so moved by her loyalty and wisdom that he grants her an unconditional boon, even the life of Satyavān. Sāvitri proclaims that she was already granted the life of Satyavān when he granted her request for a hundred sons. How could a wife conceive a hundred sons without her husband? Yama grants the life of Satyavān, and Sāvitri and Satyavān return to their families to live long, happy lives.

Holst’s Adaptation of Sāvitri

Holst’s adaptation of the Sāvitri episode from the *Mahābhārata* is typical of modern adaptations of the Sanskrit text. Holst eliminates elements that make it distinctively “Indian,” such as description of Hindu rituals and the names of Hindu gods and of other characters, including Sāvitri’s and Satyavān’s parents and Nārada, the religious leader. Holst also adds reinterpreted Hindu elements not a part of the original story, particularly the concept of Māyā. By eliminating Hindu-Indian elements from the original and adding foreign elements, Holst creates a libretto that is no longer uniquely Indian, instead presenting a much simpler story appropriate for a slender one-act opera. Although condensing a text for use as an opera libretto is a traditionally recognized
constraint of the genre, Holst is very specific in the elimination of traits that represent the Indian Other and replacing them with attributes that represent a British Self.

Holst significantly simplifies the Sāvitri story in comparison to its original version in the *Mahābhārata*. The only characters in Holst’s version are Sāvitri, Satyavān, and Death. The castle scene with Sāvitri’s father and mother is removed. Instead, Holst opens the story with Sāvitri in the forest, hearing Death’s proclamation of who he is and what he is about to do—take Satyavān away. Omitted are the more elaborate elements of King Aśvapati’s inability to have a child and Sāvitri’s inability to find a husband, her choice of Satyavān as a husband, and her discovery that he is doomed to die. With it Holst removes not only the beginning and ending of the story, but also the importance of the sage in the Hindu social structure. Holst also omits the family element of the story, for neither Sāvitri’s nor Satyavān’s parents appear in Holst’s version of the story.

Another important modification to the original story is Sāvitri’s initial response to Death. In the original, Sāvitri does not know who Yama is; Yama has to introduce himself to her. In Holst’s version, Sāvitri not only is aware of who Death is from the beginning but has been in contact with him. Although Holst’s opera opens with Death proclaiming who he is, this is presented as something that she has heard before. Sāvitri proclaims, “Again, again those words of dread, day or night they never leave me.” Death is no mystery to her.

With the omission of any reference to Hindu rituals, Holst takes away one of the key features of the original story. One of the main objectives of the *Mahābhārata* is the transmission of Hindu rituals by the religious leaders who either performed the *Mahābhārata* or presented it in the form of the Sanskrit epics to the next generation.30

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The importance of ritual in connection with the *Mahābhārata* cannot be overstated. Large sections of the Sāvitri episode, for example, describe rituals involved in the Hindu faith. Thus Aśvapati’s performance of rituals wins him the favor of the goddess Sāvitri and, therefore, a child. Also, Aśvapati’s and Sāvitri’s performance of rituals grants them their common goal of finding a suitable husband for Sāvitri. Finally, Sāvitri’s ritual of fasting and prayer gives her the courage and wisdom to face Yama, gain his favor, and eventually win the life of her husband Satyavan. The ritual element in the Sāvitri episode is foundational to the original text’s cultural importance. 31

Holst also emphasizes Sāvitri’s love as the catalyst for changing Death’s mind and having him return Satyavan to life. However, the original story focuses on Sāvitri’s ability to perform her duties, both in rituals and as a loyal wife to Satyavan, while emphasizing her knowledge of the laws that govern Hindu religion. 32 It is not so much her tricking Yama into granting her the life of Satyavan as her knowledge of the Hindu family structure according to the law that allows her to reclaim the life of Satyavan. In most modern Western adaptations of the *Mahābhārata* story, including Holst’s, this element is absent.

Holst also reduces the boons that Death grants to one. By omitting the other boons and their order within the story, Holst suppresses the hierarchical structure of importance in Sāvitri’s requests. The original reflects the duties of a Hindu wife, which include holding the well-being of her father-in-law above the well-being of her own father and the well-being of her own family above her own personal needs. In Holst’s version, Sāvitri places her request in the first person, “Give me life.” Although her motive is to

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save the life of her husband, Sāvitri is presented more as an individual than as a member of a social structure, as she was in the original story. The absence of any reference to others besides Satyavān and herself, even family members, stresses her status as an individual, and as an individual, she requests something that would benefit her directly instead of the social group.

In his version of the Sāvitri episode, Holst also omits the end of the original story, concluding the opera with the departure of Death. In the original, Sāvitri and Satyavān return to the forest and rejoice with Satyavān’s parents, then return to Sāvitri’s parents and rejoice again. Holst’s version of the Sāvitri story is, therefore, a slice from the middle section of the original story, with rituals of thanksgiving omitted. Holst leaves out the emphasis on family that was one of the main themes of the original and so central to Hindu culture.

There are no references to Hindu gods in Holst’s opera. Sāvitri the goddess is not introduced, nor does the king perform rituals to please the goddess in Holst’s version. Moreover, Death is presented as Death and not as the god of Death Yama. Although Death is depicted as a holy being in Holst’s version, Death is not endowed with the characteristics that make him a Hindu god. Death starts the opera as a stoic figure fulfilling his duty, but by the end of the opera, has become more human. In the original story, Yama retains his dignity and his stoicism. Although he reacts to Sāvitri’s wisdom and loyalty, he does not show any emotion, maintaining the self-control highly regarded in Hindu culture.33

Holst removes a great deal of the original story for his libretto and also adds certain elements. He makes one concept in the libretto the main subject of the opera—the

concept of Māyā. In Hindu-Indian culture, Māyā is both a goddess and the concept that the goddess represents, a reality built on illusion. It is the Hindu perception of the creation and conservation of reality through time. The goal of the Hindu is to transcend the illusion of life that Māyā creates and achieve a state of union with Brahma.\textsuperscript{34}

However, the term Māyā is never mentioned in the original Sāvitri episode, nor does the concept figure in it indirectly. Māyā does not appear in the Sanskrit text until one of the later books of the Rig Vedas, and its connection to illusion is not made until the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad, or Lawbooks, a translation of which Holst owned throughout his entire adult life.\textsuperscript{35}

Holst focuses on the illusionary aspect of Māyā in his opera. Māyā as illusion was one of the main concepts borrowed from India by theosophists, the New England transcendentalists, and German philosophers, including Schelling and Schopenhauer.\textsuperscript{36}

This use of the term Māyā was carried over into British popular literature of the nineteenth century. The frontispiece of Frazer’s *Silent Gods and Sun-Steeped Lands* contains an inscription from one of Walt Whitman’s poems, “Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?” The line reads, “Have you no thought, O dreamer, that it may be all Māyā, illusion?” This concept of Māyā permeates Sāvitri.


Sāvitri presents Māyā not with the multiple connotations found in Indian culture but within the more familiar frame of reference available to Holst. Māyā is the physical world obscuring an alternate reality revealed only by reaching a transcendent state. Holst emphasized this aspect of the concept throughout his opera. Māyā’s connection with the physical world is stated by Satyavān in measures 109-114 where he defines Māyā. To Satyavān, Māyā is “illusion, dreams, phantoms” and the physical reality in which he lives. Sāvitri, on the other hand, sees past Māyā into the supernatural world around her. She does not just know what Māyā is in accordance with Hindu law but knows Māyā because she can see past it. That Satyavān’s knowledge of Māyā is not as deep as Sāvitri’s experience of Māyā is demonstrated in measure 136 when Satyavān fails to see Death’s effect on the supernatural world beyond Māyā. Sāvitri’s eyes are open to a world around her that is beyond the physical shadow of Māyā. She has reached a level of awareness beyond that of Satyavān.

Holst’s incorporation of the concept of Māyā into Sāvitri reveals the tendency to assimilate alien ideas into a familiar context. Although the use of Indian texts was common in early twentieth-century Europe, Holst’s opera is unique in its merging of a Hindu-Indian story with his own ideas. Holst does not depend on the story’s exotic elements in order to tap into the attractiveness of the “East” in popular culture. Rather, he uses it as a vehicle through which to convey ideas that he believes are common to Hindu-Indian culture, while avoiding certain features of the original story that would complicate the simplicity found in his opera Sāvitri.

CHAPTER 2
LOVE, DEATH, AND HOLST’S STYLISTIC DUALISM

Instead of using musical techniques informed by Indian music, either in the form of exoticism or in an attempt to represent Hindu-Indian culture, Holst utilizes a blend of two specifically Western musical styles to present his ideas: post-Wagnerian tonality and folk idioms. Certain sections of the opera present the two styles as binary opposites that represent the struggle taking place in the opera, the complexity of Wagnerian style contrasting with the simplicity of the folk idioms. Supernatural aspects of the opera, such as death and Māyā, are associated with the chromaticism of Wagnerian style, while the ideals of the commoner and love are linked to the diatonic folk style. The dichotomy of the two styles reinforces the dichotomy of love and death presented in the opera and emphasizes Holst’s aesthetic, philosophical, and social views.

Supernatural in Music

In the opera, Holst represents the difference between Māyā and the spiritual world beyond it with a women’s chorus.¹ The chorus is both familiar and alien: the human voices are audibly recognizable, but mysterious because the source of the sound is off stage and, therefore, invisible to the audience. Also, the chorus does not sing any identifiable words; the audience hears only vocables on open syllables. Usually the chorus sings sustained chords that alternate between A major and F minor, as in mm. 109-114 (ex. 1). The alternation between the two chords with neither becoming dominant creates a static space. Mimicking the drama, the music temporarily ceases to progress. Even during the sections where the chorus has imitative contrapuntal material, as in mm. 215-233 (ex. 2), there are no cadences to provide a sense of arrival or structural

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¹ A similar use of a women’s chorus can be found in Sita and The Planets.
hierarchy. Instead, the contrapuntal material, a one-measure motive to be discussed later in this chapter, presents an ostinato that is transferred from voice to voice and continually avoids harmonic progression until m. 226. The diatonic ascending motion that results in a weak peak at mm. 223-24 on G and a stronger peak at m. 228, again on G, along with the continuous D drone suspends the harmonic activity of the piece. The stillness of time mimics the transcendent state that Holst is conveying in the text, an area free of the constraints of time and space.

Example 1. Chorus singing alternating chords, mm. 110-12, piano reduction. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.²

Example 2. Chorus in counterpoint, mm 214-233. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.
Love

Holst presents love as a transcendent force that is powerful, even more so than Death. Sāvitrī’s love for Satyavān gives her the strength to face Death and return life to

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3 “Death” is used as a proper noun in reference to the personified Death in Holst’s opera and other personifications of death.
Example 3. Excerpt from Sāvītri’s Song, mm. 160-176. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.
Satyavān; indeed Sāvitrī proclaims the love of Satyavān to be her life’s blood. Love is the force that converts Death, although only momentarily, from a stoic god to an emotional being that consents to give back Satyavān. Sāvitrī sees her existence dependent on Satyavān’s presence; their lives are linked. For example, when Sāvitrī first introduces Satyavān (mm. 49-57), she proclaims her love and emotional dependence on Satyavān. “Satyavān, Satyavān, He the strong and fearless one, In whose hands an ace is a feather? He in whom I live, Whose soul dwells in mine.” Later, Sāvitrī’s recurring song proclaims her love for and devotion to Satyavān (ex. 3, mm. 160-176).

Sāvitrī’s song, which continues until Death’s interruption at m. 201, has a folk-like character, its largely diatonic melody divided into short, symmetrical, and repetitive phrases and changing meter, characteristics also found in Satyavān’s opening song (mm. 72-97) heard earlier in the opera. The lyrical references to mother-like behavior (“Like to a babe in his mother’s robe” mm. 184-186) along with the prevalence of a descending, stepwise melodic line at the beginning of each phrase (mm. 160-61, 168-69, and 170b-171) give the song the character of a traditional European lullaby. Sāvitrī’s lullaby is both the powerful expression of her love and, symbolically, the driving force of the opera. At the conclusion of the opera, just as Satyavān prophesied earlier, it is Sāvitrī’s love that remains when all else disappears. Her lullaby, the musical representation of her love for Satyavān, returns at m. 527 and continues until the end of the opera.

Holst also suggests Sāvitrī’s love for other people besides Satyavān, who are not physically present in the opera but are mentioned by Death. Death commends Sāvitrī on the way she treats others through her love. Death tells Sāvitrī, “The faces are the sufferers thou hast comforted. The voices are the sweet words thou hast spoken; the air is made holy by thy love” (mm. 236-242). Sāvitrī’s love for others is one of the qualities that intrigues Death. He follows the previous statement with a very powerful declaration of
his fondness for Sāvitri—“Being with thee is being in Paradise. With thee the Gods themselves may dwell” (mm. 243-249). According to Death, Sāvitri’s love, although still linked to the physical world through her wanting to have Satyavān physically with her and wanting to have children, places her on a transcendent level.

Sāvitri’s love moves the other characters, Satyavān and Death, to return it in kind. In m. 61, Satyavān enters stating his love for his wife. In the refrain of his song, he greets her with a rhetorical question that expresses not just love but adoration for his beloved wife. “What wife in all the world is like to Sāvitri?” (mm. 64-66 and 81-83). Death also sings of Sāvitri’s greatness in mm. 233-249 and eventually, in his only emotional outburst in the opera, offers Sāvitri her heart’s desire—the life of her beloved husband—in mm. 400-413 (ex. 4).

Example 4. Death’s emotional outburst, mm. 400-13. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

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4 This rhetorical question is similar to the question that began the bard’s telling of the Sāvitri story. (J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans. and ed., Mahābhārata: Book 3, The Book of the Forest, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975], 760.)
Even before Death’s surrender to Sāvitri’s request, Holst presents love as a transcendent force with a power beyond that of Māyā and death. After Satyavān’s declaration of what Māyā is, he slips into a short aria-like section (ex. 5, mm. 114-127) singing about love as offering a glimpse of a reality that is beyond the false world of Māyā. Satyavān uses a chain of analogies to express the importance of love and its ability to reach beyond the physical world. After asking what remains when Māyā is removed, he states, “Love to the lover, the child to the mother, the song to the singer, God to the worshipper; These wand‘ring thro’ the world of Māyā are perchance shadows of that which is.” In this section, Satyavān not only describes the transcendent nature of love but also hints at the complex relationship between Māyā and the world beyond it. His style, at this point, mimics Sāvitri’s style in its tonality. Satyavān’s melodic line is no longer represented by folk idioms as in his opening song in mm. 72-97. His lines are more chromatic with constant shifting of a tonal center and a more expressive contour. Satyavān’s words will be reiterated throughout the opera.

Example 5. Satyavān’s aria-like section about Māyā, mm. 114-127. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd
Sāvitri’s ability to defeat Death through love is the essential feature that separates Holst’s treatment of the episode from the original version in the *Mahābhārata*. In Holst’s version, Sāvitri’s love is the root of her greatness, not, as in the original, her knowledge of Hindu culture, especially ritual, or her sense of duty. According to Holst, Sāvitri’s other positive attributes—loyalty, sense of duty, wisdom, and ability to achieve transcendence—derive from her ability to love. This view of love reveals Holst’s emphasis on emotion over convention. Rather than being motivated by social conventions to be a dutiful wife and stay by her husband’s side even if it places her life in danger, Sāvitri’s love for him moves her to safeguard her husband.

Death

Holst’s portrayal of Death demonstrates Hindu-Indian influences. Although the personification of death is not limited specifically to Hinduism, presenting Death in semi-human form with the ability to be moved emotionally is common in Hindu texts. The Sāvitri episode from the *Mahābhārata* is an example of Death portrayed as an emotional being, able to be persuaded by humans to change his course of action. The degree to which Death controls his emotional expression, however, is different in Holst’s Sāvitri from in the Hindu tradition. Although there are varying representations of death in Hindu culture, the Yama figure, as seen in the original Sāvitri episode, is usually portrayed as someone who embodies the qualities for judging a Hindu. The ability to control

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5 See Chapter 1.

6 A similar theme of emotion over convention is associated with the original Sanskrit epic in Sāvitri’s willingness to choose Satyavān as her husband even after being warned by a sage and her father of Satyavān’s impending death.


emotions is one of the important qualities found in the original version; emotions are present but are controlled.\(^9\) Holst’s Death, on the other hand, lacks this degree of control. In the opera, Death has, at times, an unchecked emotional side.

The emotional side of Death is not presented at first but rather is developed during the course of the opera. The opera opens with Death singing a monotonous melody (ex. 6) that states who he is. Both the “I-am” statements (mm. 4-15) and the melodic lines, especially mm. 1-3, present Death as immovable. The statements focus on his duty as Death, the syllabic text setting giving each word weight. The frequent alternation between a minor third (or augmented second) and major third at the end of phrases and other similar disruptions of tonal relationships, such as the Phrygian character found in mm. 13-19 with the two phrase endings on G-sharp, give the melody a neo-modal character. Harmonically, however, mm. 1-25 suggest a tonal dichotomy between A minor and F minor. An A flat measure quickly replaces the G sharp of the previous measure, an enharmonic relationship further emphasized by a phrase starting with an A flat and ending with an A natural. This phrase, first heard in mm. 10-12, represents Death throughout the opera. Later in the opera, the same two tonal centers are used in the chorus accompanying a dialogue between Satyavān and Sāvitri about Māyā, recalling and reinforcing the mysterious mood of the opera’s beginning.

When Death physically shows himself to Sāvitri for the first time, he reveals his emotional side. In response to Sāvitri, Death shows that he is impressed by her love for others. In mm. 233-249 (ex. 7), Death continues Sāvitri’s musical style by returning the praise that she gave him with praise for her. He no longer sings his monotonous song of duty and responsibility, but rather sings of love and of the woman who, he thinks,

\(^9\) Nooten, 78.
embodies it, his words carrying less weight than they once did, the rhythms less rigid, more rapid, and less repetitive. In his opening section, the range was less than an octave, the first opening segment (mm. 1-12) within the range of a major sixth. After m. 233, Death’s vocal register extends beyond the octave, each phrase expanding the intervallic leaps. Death’s emotional praise of Sāvitri uses more disjunct intervals than the prevailing
stepwise motion of his opening monologue, but the ambiguity created by the shifting between F minor and A minor has disappeared. It is Sāvitri, therefore, who brings out the emotional side of Death while providing tonal stability to Death’s moment of emotional volatility.

Although Death displays a temporary lack of control over his emotions, he regains his self-restraint by reminding himself of his duty (mm. 259-60). The return is marked by the phrase “I am he who leadeth men onward” sung to the motive, a three-note descending minor third followed by a leap of a major third, associated with Death and heard previously in mm. 6-7 (see ex. 5, p. 34) and throughout the opera. Death’s passion overtakes him one final time in mm. 400-413 (see ex. 3, p. 31), an emotional outburst conveyed through an extension of the range to an upper F. The F is pushed in intensity and duration and concludes Death’s part in the opera until his return near the end, singing the material that introduced the work (mm. 517-528).

Just as Holst develops Death’s character during the course of the opera by revealing his emotional side, Holst also changes Sāvitri’s reaction to Death throughout the opera. Her initial reaction to him is one of fear, the use of tonality in this section emphasizing the ambiguity Death creates for her future. In contrast, Death’s clarity of duty is shown in the repetitiveness of his opening song. Sāvitri’s recitative section (mm. 25-61) stands in stark contrast to Death’s ominous opening. Her panic is presented in a line that seems never to find any resolution. Measures 40-43 (ex. 8) contain D, E flat, and C sharp in a single phrase. Although this could be seen as tonally framing D by a half step above and below, the C sharp that ends each phrase, the brevity of the D pitch, and the shifting of C sharp and E flat to their natural positions before and after this section undermine the status of D as the tonal center. A similar intervalic relationship occurs in mm. 58-61 when Sāvitri quotes Death. Here, a G is followed by both an F-sharp and a G-
Example 7. Death’s Sāvītri-like section, mm 230-249. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.
Example 7 (cont.). Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.
Example 7 (cont.). Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.
sharp, dividing the phrase in two with the first half in C major and the second in E major, emphasized by the E major chord at m. 61. Furthermore, Sāvitrī’s line provides a series of dissonances and consonances with Death’s continuing line. For example, in m. 33 the
diminished seventh that appears on Death’s word “breaketh” is replaced momentarily by an octave F. The consonances are very brief, however, and are interrupted by striking dissonances with Death’s line in A minor, representing the agony Sāvitri feels because of Death’s presence.

Example 9. Death in contrast with Sāvitri, m 33. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Example 10. Sāvitri quotes Death, mm 58-61. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Sāvitri’s fear is not based directly on any threat to her own life but to that of Satyavān’s. When Death appears in m. 201, Sāvitri is still in a state of panic, but by m. 215 her fear turns into reverence, her melodic line becoming diatonic and no longer tonally unstable, by mm. 218-224 clearly centered on a pivotal, repeated B (ex. 11). This tonal focus suggests her focus on the moment and her admiration for Death and recognition of his role in life. The fearful anticipation of Death’s arrival has turned into
awe at his greatness, no longer the enemy that lurks in the darkness but rather a god. The choral accompaniment amplifies this reverent mood. In the middle of m. 226 (ex. 12), the motive used throughout this choral section (ex. 13) is transposed up a major second and

Example 11. Sāvītrī’s reverence for Death, mm. 218-224. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Example 12. Chorus motive transposed, mm. 225-228. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

continues in order to provide a scalar motion toward G at m. 228, acting as the third in E-flat major and foreshadowing the strong tonal resolution and tonal area of G at m. 234.

During the opera, Holst also develops Death’s level of influence. Just as at first the opera presents Death as stoic, it also presents Death as a being with strong influence
over the future of the other characters. The taking of Satyavān’s life will affect not only Satyavān himself but also Sāvitri. Sāvitri’s opening section conveys the change Death represents. Fragments from Death’s opening section appear in Sāvitri’s distraught first lines. Death fills her thoughts and dreams just as his musical material fills her recitative-like declaration of Death’s presence. When Death is not singing, Sāvitri provides his characteristic melodic material (ex. 14: m. 28) and, at times, quotes his words (ex. 15, mm. 46-48, p. 47 and ex. 10, mm. 58-61, p. 43). The orchestra enters for the first time at m. 43 with Death’s opening material, evoking Death’s ominous existence and the
foreshadowing of his eventual physical presence. It is not until m. 49 when Sāvitri focuses on the object of her love, Satyavān, that Death’s perpetual existence momentarily ceases to be represented by the music. Satyavān’s name takes Sāvitri’s mind away from Death and thus achieves temporary suspension of the Death motive. However, when Sāvitri’s thoughts about Satyavān turn to his impending demise, the Death motive returns with a quotation of his words in mm. 58-61 (ex. 10, p. 43).

Although the opera presents Death as having a strong influence over the lives of the other characters, as the opera progresses, Death’s limitations come to the forefront. While the personified Death has a strong influence on the lives of the characters in the opera, death, in the abstract, is also a transient state, or event, between this life and the next. Even Death’s opening statements suggest a transitory nature (see ex. 5, p. 34). His metaphorical reference to being a gate is indicative of his own realization of having a temporary effect on others. Repeating the gate metaphor twice in Death’s opening monologue (see ex. 6, mm. 10-12 and 23-25, p. 37) emphasizes Death’s finitude. Also, the musical material that accompanies the phrase “I am the gate that opens for all” is repeated several times in mm. 20-25 with different words. The last repetition of the motive uses similar wording by referring back to the gate metaphor. This motive reappears several times throughout the opera, recalling its original text. Sāvitri uses the Death motive (ex. 16) several times when referring directly to Death. For example, after the orchestra uses the motive, Sāvitri echoes the motive when she quotes Death’s phrase “I come for thy husband” in mm. 46-48 (ex. 17) which is set to a modified gate motive, now more tonally secure with the perfect fourth returning to the F that started the short phrase. The motive also appears in variation when Satyavān talks of Māyā seizing him in mm. 489-90. The final statement of Death’s brevity occurs at the end with Death slowly fading out of the opera. Death states that he has been conquered by Sāvitri and that even
Example 16. Death motive. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Example 17. Satyavān sings the Death motive, mm 489-90. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

he is part of Māyā, an association that emphasizes his limitations.

Despite Death’s recognition of his transitory nature, Sāvitri ultimately has to remind him of his own impermanence by the end of the opera. She even employs the same metaphors. When Sāvitri confronts Death for not granting her wish, she uses the word “gate” to draw a distinction between death and life (m. 351). Later, Sāvitri uses a similar word to emphasize death’s brevity. As Sāvitri continues her comparison of the natures of death and life, she metaphorically links Death to a portal. “Thou art for the moment, a portal soon passed” (mm. 366-369). However, as Sāvitri states, “life is eternal, greater than thou” (mm. 373-379). Ultimately, Sāvitri’s knowledge of the difference between death and life gives her the power to conquer Death (mm. 519-520).

Romanticizing the “Common”

By presenting Sāvitri and Satyavān outside their royal positions and as living a more simplified lifestyle, Holst portrays a romantic view of the “common.” Their
relationship is strong in its simplicity; Satyavan is to be the strong husband who provides for his wife, Sāvitrī the loving wife who cares for her husband. The opera emphasizes Sāvitrī’s role as wife and mother. As Sāvitrī proclaims the granting of her wish, she excitedly describes “the life of a woman, of wife, of mother,” as if the three are synonymous (mm 417-419). This bond between being a woman and being a wife allows Sāvitrī to “trick” Death into granting the life of Satyavan.

The opera also presents Satyavan in the romantic view of the “common man.” Holst’s Satyavan is a man of simple means who has a close relationship with nature. He is not presented as he is in the original Sāvitrī episode—an exiled prince who will regain his position—but rather as a common woodsman. Sāvitrī introduces him in mm. 50-53 as strong and courageous. In his own song (ex. 18), he states that he could chop down a tree with one stroke of an axe, and his melody and words suggest the idealized common man prevalent in English discourse during Holst’s time.¹⁰ The folk-like character of Satyavan’s opening song evokes a simple life of working and living in the forest. Nature is Satyavan’s friend, as he states in mm. 89-90. The repetition of short phrases and the neo-modal style of Holst’s folk-inspired musical language emphasize Satyavan’s simplicity.

In his musical representation of Satyavan, Holst draws on his work with English folksongs. Sections of the opera place folk-like melodies and rhythms within a tonal harmonic context. The quasi-modal beginnings of the first two lines and all of the third

line are in A-Dorian, with its characteristic F-sharp (Ex. 18). However, by the fourth line, the tonal center shifts to E, the melody suggesting a dominant relationship to the A.

Example 18. Satyavān’s song. mm 72-84. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Rhythmically, Satyavān’s song utilizes irregular meters with the first three lines in an asymmetrically subdivided meter.

In presenting Satyavān as a simple woodsman, Holst also shows him to be naïve when it comes to the supernatural world around him. Although Satyavān can recite Hindu
philosophy on the metaphysical world and its relationship to the physical world of illusion, Māyā, his understanding remains at a basic level. He does not fully comprehend what he is stating because he lacks the experience and the vision of Sāvitrī, who has seen beyond the physical world. Satyavān knows only what he has been taught, information that he repeats to Sāvitrī in mm. 109-114 in a recitative style. At m. 115, Satyavān elaborates on the power of love in several different types of relationships. At this point, Satyavān breaks from his usual diatonicism into a more chromatic style that becomes tonally ambiguous, almost as if he breaks from his limited knowledge of Māyā into a transcendental state like Sāvitrī. Measures 123-125 (ex. 19), containing a pitch followed by a semitone above and below, are strikingly similar to Sāvitrī’s melodic line at mm. 40-43 and 58-61. (In Satyavān’s case, it is a C sharp followed by a D natural and a C natural.) He, however, never reaches Sāvitrī’s level of discernment but instead is interrupted by Sāvitrī and eventually taken by an enemy he cannot see, Death.

Example 19. Satyavān mimics Sāvitrī’s musical style, mm 123-25. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Satyavān is not fully aware of Māyā and his approaching death but Sāvitrī, despite her greater awareness, still depends on him. Holst emphasizes Sāvitrī’s dependence on and loyalty to Satyavān throughout the opera. In Sāvitrī’s opening remarks about Satyavān, she describes him as “He in whom I live, Whose soul dwells in mine” (mm.
53-57), a symbiotic relationship crucial to Sāvitri’s character. Later, after Sāvitri describes the role of a woman, she declares, “If Satyavān die, my voice is mute, my feet may never travel the path” (mm. 425-431). Later, she expands on the idea of “the path” by stating that Satyavān alone can teach her the path, the “path of flowers.” This path is the ultimate goal of a woman—to be a dutiful wife and mother.

The idea that without Satyavān, Sāvitri is mute brings with it musical ramifications, one of which is that Sāvitri possesses no musical material of her own without Satyavān. Her opening section, discussed earlier (see ex. 7, p. 39-42), is an accompaniment to Death’s monologue. As Tomas Block points out, “The vocal line given to Sāvitri has the character of an ‘obbligato’ contrapuntal addition to Death’s monologue.” Block continues by describing the sections where Sāvitri sings during resting segments of Death’s monologue as “nothing more than ... a few parlando phrases with no function beyond the linking of one musically more significant section to the next.”

Although this statement underestimates the importance of Sāvitri’s line in creating dramatic tension by providing stark contrast to Death’s stoic monologue, it suggests the unimportance of Sāvitri’s material before Satyavān’s presence enables her singing, Sāvitri’s main song appearing only after Satyavān is dead (m. 160), an observation Block also makes. Another important point occurs when Sāvitri sings Satyavān’s song near the end of the opera as an incantation to bring Satyavān back from the dead (ex. 20, mm. 474-79). Sāvitri ends the song with the words “Thou art bringing me my life.” Satyavān gives Sāvitri life. Without him, she is “as the dead.”

Holst’s Break with Tradition

Even though Sāvitri’s dependence on Satyavān is made utterly clear throughout the opera, Holst adds another level of complexity to the relationship between Sāvitri and Satyavān. As mentioned earlier, whereas Satyavān has a superficial understanding of

Example 20. Sāvitri sings Satyavān’s musical material, mm 474-79. Used with permission from J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd.

Māyā and the spiritual/supernatural, Sāvitri experiences Māyā to the point that she is no longer under its spell. Sāvitri, not Satyavān, is free from Māyā.

Because of her privileged state, Sāvitri becomes both a mother-like figure to Satyavān and the heroine of the opera. Her lullaby, sung after Satyavān falls unconscious, conveys this complex relationship, the strong male figure treated as a child who needs protection. The Satyavān presented in the beginning of the opera is no match for Death. It is not Sāvitri’s strength that defeats Death but her knowledge of Māyā. Nevertheless, the perspective gained through the course of the opera changes the context of the line “Thy thoughts are mine, My spirit dwells with thee” heard in mm. 164-67, after Satyavān’s death, and then again, at the end of the opera, in mm. 530-33. The statement is no longer
one of a woman submitting to and dependent on a man because of his possession of and her lack of power but of a choice to be dependent through a relationship that she wants. Sāvitri needs Satyavān because she loves him and wants to define her identity through her role as a wife and a mother.

The Mixing of Two Musical Styles

Holst utilizes both post-Wagnerian tonal language and the newly developed folk idioms in Sāvitri to convey the main themes of the opera. At times the two languages are placed at odds with each other in order to create a duality between the fear associated with Death and the love that accompanies Sāvitri and Satyavān’s relationship. Sāvitri’s song just before Death appears next to her (mm. 160-200) exemplifies this duality by accompanying the section concerning Sāvitri’s love for Satyavān with a diatonic, quasi-modal style that abruptly shifts at m. 178 when Sāvitri describes Death’s approach. The return of the beginning of Sāvitri’s song in m. 184 complicates the duality presented in the previous measures by merging the two styles.

Wagnerism in Sāvitri

In certain sections of the opera, Holst manipulates his post-Wagnerian tonal language to create an exotic mood, but the exoticism has less to do with the Indian source for the libretto than with the mysticism and spirituality Holst was attempting to convey. The exoticism in this opera is not an attempt to represent Indian otherness, as discussed in the chapter on the libretto’s source, but rather an attempt to suggest distance between the physical and the non-physical world.

Holst applies several melodic techniques to achieve a sense of the supernatural, for example using the augmented second to add a degree of exoticism while ending each phrase on different intervals within the local tonality. The gesture of a descending minor
third followed by a major third leap, as seen in the first few lines of Sāvitrī (see ex. 5, p. 36), becomes a common figure throughout the opera and gives it a characteristic sound. Holst uses a similar technique when the chorus enters during Satyavān’s explanation of Māyā (see ex. 1, p. 30). Here the conflict between the realms of A and F continues, this time in their parallel major modes. The voices slide between the two chords in stepwise motion. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this section conveys a sense of mystery. The similarity in technique and the theme of mysticism provide continuity in the opera and present an implicit relationship that is later stated explicitly in Death’s last words of the opera—“For even Death is Māyā” (mm. 527-28).

One of the most dramatic Wagnerian techniques Holst uses is his treatment of musical climaxes. During her pleading for Satyavān’s life, Sāvitri’s music builds to several climaxes that are interrupted by Death’s semi-stoic response. However, by m. 400, Death succumbs to the emotional momentum in a line that remains in his upper register most of the time and ends at m. 413 on a high F. The following section continues the emotional momentum with the repetitive rhythms and an oscillating melody that continually moves toward climactic resolution.

Sāvitrī and the Folk Idiom

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Holst used folksong characteristics, such as fluctuating meter and irregular melodic contour, to solve a perceived problem in singing in the English language. In Sāvitrī, and example of one of his attempts at solving this perceived problem, the recitative sections are free of any strict meter and the melodic contour flows with the words and vocal inflection. For example, when Satyavān begins to discuss Māyā starting in m. 109, barlines are almost non-existent, and the melody is frequently monotone, changing pitches to simulate the natural rise and fall of an English sentence.
As stated in the previous chapter, Satyavāṇ’s song (ex. 18, p. 49) exemplifies a more direct relationship between English folksong and Holst’s musical style. The song is not a direct reference to a specific English folksong but captures specific common elements Holst found in his study of English folktunes; the most important of which is emotional restraint, a characteristic Holst also found in Hinduism. Satyavāṇ does not sing elaborate, *bel canto* melodies but more rugged lines that fit with his character. The Dorian mode, so common to English folksongs, suits the carefree mood of the song. The rhythm almost seem to defy notation with its shifts from duple to triple meter.

A Stylistic Turning Point

In *Sāvitrī*, Holst employs a unique juxtaposition of two styles, post-Wagnerism and English folksong, to create a chamber opera that presents a struggle between love and death. Not only does Holst use the simplicity associated with folksongs and uncertainty associated with chromaticism to shift the mood and create dramatic tension within the opera, but the contrast between the two styles represent a turning point in Holst’s compositional output. Although on a smaller scale, the elements Holst considered “good old Wagnerian bawling” are still present and will remain in the background of his musical language. In the end, however, the diatonic elements and simplicity of the folksong style triumphs over the Wagnerisms, mirroring Holst’s stylistic change and introducing a musical language that will be present in his later works, including *St. Paul’s Suite* (1913) and *At the Boars Head* (1924).

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CONCLUSION

MUSICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF CHANGE

A Turning Point in British History

Sāvitri represents a turning point in British history. Although Holst removes the elements that make the Hindu-Indian culture and the English folksongs unique, the elements that do make the transition into Western opera are presented in a positive manner. There was a definite interest in both areas among a select population in Britain. Some Britons were reconsidering cultural barriers. The Victorian idea of aristocratic imperialism and a culture based on political and economic might was beginning to wane. The twentieth century opened a new chapter in British history that emphasized social change. Although still influenced by its imperial past, Holst’s Sāvitri is a contribution to the new era by incorporating a colonial culture in positive terms without relying on the purely exotic, offering a new view of traditional gender relationships that does not depend solely on convention, and representing the British commoner as the British ideal instead of romanticizing the English aristocracy.

The appropriation of the Other in this manner blurs the line in the dichotomy between the Other and the Self by creating elements that are difficult to classify into one of the two categories. Sāvitri is influenced by both the romanticised English folk culture and Hindu-Indian philosophy without presenting them as exotic. Instead, Holst employs them in forming his musical and ideological identity, an identity that demonstrates a preference for the simple over the lavish while revealing the multiple influences at work in twentieth-century Britain.
Holst and Modernity

*Sāvitri* also represents a turning point in Holst’s musical style. The struggle between a musical language with strong Wagnerian influences and a newer style based on simplicity and a search for a connection to English identity mirrors the opera’s dramatic struggle between love and death. In this short opera, which contains fragments that point to later works by the composer, Holst redefines his compositional style. The grandeur associated with *Sita* gives way to a more subtle approach to opera with a small ensemble, minimal staging, and restrained musical language. *Sāvitri* represents a Holst who is dissatisfied with musical tradition and looks for inspiration in numerous other areas, including Sanskrit texts, English folksong, and unconventional philosophies and religions.

Holst’s search for identity in the unconventional causes problems for conservative musicology. Only within the last decade has musicology approached Holst’s connection with the Modern Movement, theosophy, and astrology.¹ The dependence on the biographical and critical writings by Holst’s daughter, Imogen, has limited research into these areas, which the conservative scholarly community considers marginal, even subaltern. *Sāvitri*, as well as other Holstian compositions, cannot be treated fully without considering areas that have not been investigated adequately in music scholarship. Although the importance of *Sāvitri* in Holst’s catalogue of works has not been overlooked, the multiplicities of meanings within and influences on the work have not been fully discussed, creating a partial image of a neglected twentieth-century British composer.


