

2014/1: The Thaxted Story

by BS Poh

Thaxted is a town located about 38 miles (61km) north-east of London, in the district of Essex. Through the centuries, the population has remained around 2,500 people. This town was to give its name to a beautiful hymn tune composed by Gustav Holdst, who lived there from 1917 to 1925.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Gustav Holdst was born in 1874 at Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, England. The house he was born in has been turned into a museum. His father, Adolph von Holst, was the organist and choirmaster of All Saints' Church in Pittville, while his mother, Clara Cox von Holst (nee Lediard) was a singer and pianist. The von Holsts were of Nordic origin, hailing from Riga, Latvia, a country in the Baltic region in northern Europe. At the onset of World War I, Holst dropped the "von" from his name, in 1916, in response to the anti-German sentiment of the time.

Gustav learned to play the piano and violin, and began composing when he was about twelve. He also started to play the trombone when his father thought this might improve his son's asthma. He was educated at Cheltenham Grammar School for Boys. He attended the Royal College of Music on a scholarship, where he met fellow student Ralph Vaughan Williams, who became a lifelong friend. Holst had hoped to build his career as a pianist, but had to switch to the trombone as a nerve condition increasingly affected the movement of his right hand.

In the nineteenth century, Britain was embroiled in socialism and trade union activities. This was the age when poetry, fiction, and musical pieces were produced by men who had had a Christian upbringing but were drifting from the faith. Robert Louis Stevenson of "Treasure Island" fame, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) of "Far from the Madding Crowd" fame, and Charles Hastings Parry (1848-1918) of "Jerusalem" fame were from this period. Iain H. Murray sketches the departure from the Christian faith of some writers of this period in his book "The Undercover Revolution"¹. Gustav Holst himself was to dabble with Hinduism for a time, even learning the Sanskrit language in order to read certain Sanskrit texts.

Holst and his wife Isobel settled in Thaxted, Essex, from 1917. Here, he started composing the orchestral suite "The Planets", consisting of various themes named after the planets of the Solar System. "The Planets" was to become his best known work. In a period of busyness Holst was called upon to produce a tune for the patriotic poem "I vow to Thee My Country" by Cecil Spring-Rice. Holst was relieved to find that the theme for "Jupiter" of "The Planets" fitted the words of the poem. Other tunes written by Holst that also became attached to hymns were Cranham and Sheen.

A lifetime of poor health, combined with a concussion sustained when he fell backward from the conductor's podium in 1923, led to Holst's death on 25 May 1934.

The Thaxted hymn tune

In 1925, a new hymnal “Songs of Praise” was compiled by Percy Dearmer, Martin Shaw and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Holdst’s “Thaxted” was included in this hymnal by his friend Williams, turning it into a hymn tune. “I Vow to Thee My Country”, set to this tune, was sung at the funerals of Diana, Princess of Wales in September 1997, and Margaret Thatcher who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979-1990, in April 2013.

About a dozen hymns have since been written to the tune, some of which include:

- * “We Pledge To One Another”, by Jill Jenkins (born 1937)
- * “O God Beyond All Praising”, by Michael Perry (produced 1982)
- * “When Jesus Lived Among Us He Came”, by Timothy Dudley-Smith (produced 1980)
- * “O God, Show Mercy To Us”, Psalm 67, Book of Psalms for Worship, Reformed Presbyterian Church.

To this repertoire we have added another, entitled “The Song of songs to worship”. The idea of composing a hymn based on the Song of Solomon came while I was preaching through this book of the Bible from the October 2006 to May 2007. Studies on the book were carried out in other places subsequently, culminating in the publication of the book, “The Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valleys: An Exposition on the Song of Solomon”², in 2013. The hymn, which is included at the end of the book, is as follows:

**The Song of songs to worship,
Our King, the Lord Jesus;
I sought Him not but He sought
Me in my darkest hours;
My restlessness soul He gave peace,
My nakedness He clothed;
The Rose of Sharon is He,
Whose righteousness I boast;
The Lily of the Valleys
Who brings joy, light, and cheer;
Our sins He purged, though away
He assures we are dear.**

**A garden enclosed are we
From Him is our beauty;
No merit in all our works,
Save what is our duty;
Should we not give of ourselves
To the Lord more fully?
How oft have I failed Him so,
Oh, what utter folly!
His Spirit I grieved away,
Now I seek His mercy;
O Lord Jesus, turn Your face
To me and have pity!**

**His voice we hear in words near,
To comfort, strengthen, cheer;
His Spirit fills His people
With joy and vision clear;
With love undying we serve
Our Lord who first loved us;
In weakness we cry to God
To give us fruitfulness;
May our fleeting days be spent
In Your love and mercy;
Until gathered to praise You
For all eternity!**

In the first stanza, the focus is on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The second stanza focuses on the response of the church and the individual believer to the love of the Lord. The third stanza is about the preserving care of the Lord over His people, in relation to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. We, after all, worship the trinitarian God!

When sung to the tune of Thaxted, two common variations are encountered, one of which is to use a low note in the last syllable of the fifth line, while the other variation is to sing it with a high note. While there is no hard and fast rule on the matter, we have chosen to sing it with a low note in the first two stanzas (i.e. for the words “peace” and “selves”), and with a high note in the last stanza (i.e. for the word “serve”).

While this hymn is intended primarily for worship, it is suitable for weddings. Reformed Christians would rather have their hearts lifted by the lofty truths of this hymn than sing the man-centred, sentimental, wedding songs used in other circles. This hymn was first sung by our congregation during my eldest son’s wedding.³

May God use this hymn to strengthen the faith of His children everywhere. Amen.

Notes:

1. The Undercover Revolution, by Iain H. Murray, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009.
2. The Rose of Sharon, by B. S. Poh, 2013. Available from www.amazon.com.
3. It is of interest to note that discerning non-believers can see the romantic appeal of the Thaxted tune, an example being the advertisement of this watch company at:

http://www.solvil-et-titus.com/en/index_en.html

4. A sample of the song is found at this link:

<http://youtu.be/2GCUST8hyU0>

5. A beautiful rendition of the tune is found at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLV_bJmC-w8

6. An organ rendition suitable for group practice in singing the hymn is at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ah6-70PnCY&feature=watch-vrec>

7. For music score of Thaxted, go to:

http://www.hymn-books.com/HymnBook_Hymn.php?HBHymns_ID=3386&Rge=3

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