Ralph Vaughan Williams

Born October 12, 1872, Gloucestershire, England.

The Lark Ascending, Romance for Violin and Orchestra

Vaughan Williams composed this work for violin and piano in 1914. He thoroughly revised the score in 1919–20. The first performance, in a version with piano accompaniment, was given on December 15, 1920, and the premiere of the version for violin and orchestra was given on June 14, 1921, in London. The orchestra consists of two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, triangle, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirteen minutes.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performances of Vaughan Williams’s The Lark Ascending.

From the beginning of his career, in the first years of the twentieth century, Ralph Vaughan Williams was seen as a composer rooted in the past. His first significant large-scale work, the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis composed in 1910, is indebted to the music of his sixteenth-century predecessor and to the great English tradition. His entire upbringing was steeped in tradition—he was related both to the pottery Wedgwoods and Charles Darwin. (“The Bible says that God made the world in six days,” his mother told him. “Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer: but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way.”) He became a serious student of English folk song and edited the English Hymnal.

Even the experience of studying with Ravel in 1908, which clearly enhanced his understanding of color and sonority, only served to sharpen his own individual style and to ground him more firmly in the sensibilities of his musical heritage. (Years later, Ravel would call him “the only one of my pupils who does not write my music.”) In fact, Vaughan Williams was one of the first composers of the new century who managed to forge a strong personal style almost exclusively from the materials of the past. “My advice to young composers,” he wrote, “is learn your own language first, find out your own traditions, discover what you want to do.”

The Lark Ascending, which Vaughan Williams composed in 1914, is indebted both to English folk song and to the composer’s reading of the work of the English novelist and poet George Meredith. For much of his life, Vaughan Williams lived near Dorking, Surrey, not far from Meredith’s beloved Box Hill, where the poet died, crippled and nearly deaf, in 1909. Vaughan Williams originally wrote The Lark Ascending as a short romance for violin and piano. The autograph is prefaced by lines from Meredith’s poem, “The Lark Ascending.” When Vaughan Williams enlisted in the army in 1914, after the outbreak of World War I (he was forty-one at the time), he set the score aside. The experience of serving in the war—he was an orderly with the Royal Army Medical Corps in France and then an officer—seems only to have heightened his nostalgia for a simpler time and for a world that no longer existed. It isn’t surprising then, that shortly after he came home in 1919, he picked up The Lark Ascending, lovingly fine-tuned it, and eventually orchestrated it as a touching souvenir of a time gone by. Even the song of the lark itself, which Vaughan Williams suggests in the flourishes of the solo violin, is now a rare thing, the bird’s population in decline and much of its natural habitat irrevocably spoiled.

The Lark Ascending is one of the supreme achievements of English landscape painting. In a single sweep of velvety pastoral writing, Vaughan Williams extols the untroubled joys of nature, the call of the lark, and,
particularly in the animated middle section, the genial folk music of earlier times. Vaughan Williams prefaced his score with these lines from Meredith’s poem:

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.
For singing till his heaven fills,
’Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup
And he the wine which overflows
to lift us with him as he goes.
Till lost on his aërial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

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